

## **Series Colossians**

### **This Message Whoever You Are, Live as God's Chosen People**

#### **Scripture Colossians 3:18-4:1**

In this letter Paul provided to his readers practical teaching in five areas, all of them dealing with interpersonal relationships. The first was an emphasis on the believer's relationship with Christ. Paul's argument was very straightforward: "Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts and minds on things above, and not on earthly things." Paul wanted his readers to understand that their lives "were hidden with Christ," and therefore they were to "put to death ... what ever belonged to the earthly nature," and "rid themselves" of practices which were displeasing to God.

In the second area of practical application, Paul gave instruction concerning the relationships between believers. "As God's chosen people," he said, "you are to practice compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." You are to "bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you might have against one another," and you are to show love to one another.

Paul's instructions were in sharp contrast to the teachings of those individuals who were stirring up confusion within the congregation in Colosse. The false teachers were not particularly concerned about identity with Christ. They taught that Christ was so far removed from humanity that a direct relationship was not possible and that intermediaries were necessary.

We could say that the false teachers were concerned about the behavior of believers, but that concern was only in regard to obedience to rules, regulations, and traditions. Their emphasis was not on matters of social interaction and interpersonal relationships. To them the Christ-like virtues mentioned by Paul were not as important as religious rituals.

Paul strongly emphasized that beneficial changes in attitude and behavior would come as the result of the believer's identity in Christ. In Christ the old nature with would be replaced by "the new self which is continually renewed ...in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:9-10).

All the instructions in chapter 3 were based on the command: “Set your hearts and minds on things above.” According to Paul, the behavior of believers would be determined by their degree of focus on heavenly things. In other words, the spiritual orientation of believers would determine their choices and lifestyle behaviors. The closer they were to Christ, the more Christ-like would be their behavior. In contrast, Paul stated that the information which was being given to the Colossian believers by the false teachers did not have any value in restraining participation in sensual activities (*Colossians 2:23*).

The last point I want to make in this review is that believers were identified as “God’s chosen people, holy, and dearly loved by God.” As God’s chosen people, believers were expected to manifest the power and grace of God in all their interpersonal relationships. Among themselves, believers were expected to demonstrate and practice respect, forgiveness, love, unity, peace, and joy. The expectation was summed up by Paul in his command: “Whatever you do, whether in word and deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Today our focus will be on three more areas of instruction in chapter 3. Three of the most significant problem areas in the early church were relationships between husbands and wives, between children and parents, and between slaves and slave owners. These problems were connected with attitudes and habits which carried over from the cultural backgrounds of the church members.

Let me explain why. In the Greco-Roman world, men were always in charge. Women did not have very many rights. In many ways, they were like the property of their husbands. Fathers had very little to do with the parenting of younger children. They typically exercised authority over their children without showing love or interest in them. Slavery was an accepted practice in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, slavery was considered essential for civilized society. More than half the people in the great cities of the Roman world were slaves and indentured servants — people with no personal rights. Paul understood how home life in Greco-Roman society had been shaped by a culture in which women and children were devalued and slaves were often treated as animals.

Now picture individuals with this kind of cultural background who have responded to the gospel message. They have gained a new identity with Christ. They were then expected to “put off” the old nature and to “put on the new self,” but, unfortunately, many of the old engrained patterns of personal relationships were not so easily and immediately discarded.

Beginning in verse 18, Paul made practical applications to these three problem areas. He knew that the home life of the believer was as important as the corporate life of the church fellowship. He knew that relationships within the home had to manifest the Christ-life just as the relationships within the congregation.

### **Read Colossians 3:18-4:1**

The first area of instruction concerned life in the home, the relationship between wives and husbands. The duty that Paul placed on the wife is submission, but notice that there is a qualifier: "Submit ... as is fitting in the Lord." This is an attitude that recognizes an authority that is higher than a human authority. The main thought in verse 18 is that the wife should voluntarily be willing to take second place to her husband. This, Paul states, is suitable and proper.

The husband's duty is to "love his wife." The verb "love" is the kind that requires genuine caring and concern. It's the attitude of mind that puts the well-being of the wife as top importance. It implies total devotion to the wife, the desire to bring out the best in the wife. In his letter to the Ephesian Church, Paul stated that "husbands were to love their wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (*Ephesians 5:25*). Take a moment to consider that thought. Christ laid down his life for the church. That is selfless sacrificial love, the kind of love the believing husband should have for his wife.

The word "harsh" is literally "make bitter." It is the opposite of the "love" required of the believing husband. Husbands are not to cause their wives to resent them. The point here is that if the husband demonstrates the high quality of love demanded in verse 19, the act of submission on the part of the wife will not be burdensome.

Paul does not explain the theological reasons behind these verses, but the submission of the believing wife is part of heavenly spiritual order which is explained elsewhere in Scripture. First of all, Scripture is clear that in Christ there is male and female equality. In another letter Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Galatians 3:28*). The age-old degrading of women typical of pagan societies is done away in Christ, so that wives with their husbands are "joint heirs of God's gracious gift of life" (*1 Peter 3:7*).

Secondly, the example of submission in Scripture is Jesus Himself. He was submissive to the Father, yet He is not inferior to the Father. Paul described the deity of Christ previously in this letter (*see 1:15 and 2:9*). The submission of God the Son to the Father, and of the wife to her husband, is “administrative” in structure; it has nothing to do with rank, prestige, or status. Paul wants the relationship between believing wives and husbands to demonstrate the lordship of Christ for all to see. Submission and love in the home will bear witness to the new Christ-like virtues of believers.

Next Paul turns to the relationships of children and parents. Children are to “obey their parents.” The word “obey” implies a readiness to hear and carry out instructions on a consistent basis. The reason for this command is that the obedience of children to their parents “pleases the Lord.” These words presuppose that both the parents and their children are believers.

Verse 21 balances out verse 20. Paul addresses “fathers” because they have the authority in the home and are expected to both model and provide guidance in the raising of children. Verse 21 indicates that fathers are to be positive in their parenting. They are not to treat their children in such a way that the children resent them. The relationship between parent and child is not one of power, but of nurture. Fathers must not exert their authority in unreasonable demanding ways. They must balance the expectations for obedience with love. Such a relationship between father and child would be a reversal of the normal Greco-Roman style of parenting.

The third problem area was the relationships between slaves and their masters. The bulk of Paul’s statement in these verses was addressed to slaves. There was a reason for this. From the study of early church history, we understand that very few men of power and prestige were attracted to the good news of the gospel. The most responsive groups to the gospel were women and slaves.

Slaves were the most disenfranchised people in the Roman world. In society they had no status. Only in the Church did they have acceptance. This is why many of them were drawn to Christ and became believers. However, as believers, they faced a significant moral dilemma: how could they enjoy spiritual freedom and equality in Christ, where “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female,” and at the same time properly serve their masters? The reality was that believing slaves had two masters, one on earth, who had complete authority over their physical lives, and the other in heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was sovereign over all.

Paul's initial instruction to believing slaves seemed very severe: they were to "obey their earthly masters in everything," and now notice the reason: they were "to do it ... with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord." In other words, believing slaves were to continue to work for their earthly masters but with an attitude of doing it for the honor of Christ Jesus. This is brought out in verse 23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."

The believing slave was to consider himself as the full-time worker of Christ who fulfilled his service by doing good work for his earthly master. His primary motivation was to be pleasing to Christ rather than the earthly master. This attitude would transform the effort put into the most menial tasks and would give dignity to all of the assigned duties. Slaves, like all other members of the community of believers, were to "set their hearts and minds on things above."

The work of slaves was often difficult and dehumanizing. Compensation for labor was meager if it was offered at all. By law, they were not allowed to own property and were not eligible for inheritance. Humanly speaking, slaves were in a hopeless situation. However, from a heavenly standpoint, slaves were promised a reward for service performed for the honor of the Lord. Notice verses 23 and 24: those who work for the Lord "will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." The word "receive" implies "being repaid in full what is due."

Many ethnomusicologists, that's a person who studies the music of different ethnic groups, have noted the themes of the spirituals sung by slaves in America. The focus was predominately on the rewards of heaven. They sang about their hopes for a change in their socioeconomic conditions on earth. The hopes of believing slaves in Colosse were undoubtedly also focused on the inheritance which would be theirs in heaven.

There is only one verse of instruction for masters. Paul wanted them to "provide their slaves with what is right and fair." Of course, the instruction here would be acted on only by slave owners who were themselves believers. They would be the only ones to appreciate the fact that they had "a Master in heaven." In the fellowship of believers, both slaves and masters were accountable to God for their actions.

Let me summarize these verses we have been thinking about. Paul gave practical instructions to the members of the community of believers for two reasons: They needed to know how to live and act among themselves as God's chosen people. They were to put on Christ-like virtues which would enable them to live in love and peace and unity with each other. These Christ-like virtues were to be displayed in home life as well as in community gatherings. The old attitudes and behaviors associated with the culture of non-believers were required to change dramatically. The home-lives of believers were to be examples of Christ-honoring love and peace and harmony.

And there was a second reason for Paul's instructions. Paul wanted the Colossian believers to be effective witnesses to their pagan neighbors. Christ-like lifestyles in the church community and in individual homes would be a very powerful testimony to non-believers.

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