

## Colossians 3:18 – 4:1 Godly Instructions for Day-to-Day Relationships

In today's passage we will learn that the Bible encourages slavery and that men are superior to women. Not really, but some people may not be able to read a passage like this one without coming to those exact conclusions. I sincerely hope we can clear that up.

For many, day-to-day life is an area completely separated from beliefs or values that might be called "religious" or "spiritual". They see the "real world" of hard-nosed facts on the one hand governing relationships, work and business. On the other hand, there is the private sphere for faith and religious values. You go to church on Sunday and live your real life out during the week – with an occasional extra meeting or time of prayer. Many now consider it an absolute virtue to "not let their personal faith affect how they do their job." The Bible makes no such distinction. If Jesus is Lord at all, His influence will be felt in all our relationships and responsibilities.

**In all of your relationships or roles, fulfill your responsibilities as if you were directly serving Jesus.**

Read straight through the text.

Read again, emphasizing all occurrences "the Lord" in the passage.

**<sup>18</sup>Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. <sup>19</sup>Husbands love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.**

Now, in case you haven't noticed, a successful marriage is not automatic. Most societies have devised some means by which a marriage can function according to established norms. Contemporary western culture seems to have concluded that the best solution is that either party can simply disregard what were once called "solemn vows" and even break off the relationship at will. We seem to think that marriage is somehow supposed to just "work". G.K. Chesterton once brilliantly observed:

*I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The whole aim of marriage is to **fight through and survive** the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable. For a man and a woman, as such, are incompatible. (G.K. Chesterton in What's Wrong with the World)*

**How the ancient world made marriage work:** The ancient world was highly stratified. Every relationship was viewed from a social perspective whether one was relating to a superior, an inferior or an equal. In the context of the home, the Romans had a title for the male head of the household: *paterfamilias*, who had absolute authority in his household. Most ancient writers expected wives to simply obey their husbands – case closed. Some marriage contracts even stated a requirement for absolute obedience. This requirement made sense especially to Greek thinkers, who simply could not conceive of wives as equals. Age differences contributed to the disparity: husbands were normally older than their wives, often by over a decade in Greek culture (men frequently married around age thirty and women in their teens, often early teens).

In the first century A.D. the Roman Valerius Maximus comments on historic relationships between great men of Roman history and their wives. He writes:

*Egnatius Metellus . . . took a cudgel and beat his wife to death because she had drunk some wine. Not only did no one charge him with a crime, but no one even blamed him.... Gaius Sulpicious divorced his wife because he had caught her outdoors with her head uncovered: a stiff penalty, but not without a certain logic. "The law," he said, "prescribes for you my eyes alone to which you may prove your beauty. . . . If you, with needless provocation, invite the look of anyone else, you must be suspended for wrongdoing." Quintus Antistius Vetus felt no differently when he divorced his wife because he had seen her in public having a conversation with a common freedwoman.*

Valerius Maximus concluded his chronicles of such behavior by saying:

*... And so, long ago, when the misdeeds of women were thus forestalled, their minds stayed far from wrongdoing.*

No doubt the Bible's instructions for wives to submit to husbands has been abused by some Christian men envisioning themselves a Christian version of the Roman *paterfamilias* - a sort of absolute monarch. Paul's goal is to bring all relationships under the authority of Christ. Compare this similar section of Ephesians, written about the same time.

*Ephesians 5:22-24 NKJV*<sup>22</sup>*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* <sup>23</sup>*For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.* <sup>24</sup>*Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.*

<sup>25</sup>*Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,* <sup>26</sup>*that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,* <sup>27</sup>*that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.* <sup>28</sup>*So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.* <sup>29</sup>*For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.* <sup>30</sup>*For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.* <sup>31</sup>*"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [Paul is quoting Genesis 2]* <sup>32</sup>*This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.* <sup>33</sup>*Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*

**<sup>20</sup>Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Fathers [or "parents"], do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.**

The first appeal is addressed directly to children – which in itself is remarkable. It's worth noting that Paul valued children in the church enough to speak to them directly. He points back to the Fifth Commandment – to honor father and mother.

He also speaks to parents regarding their children. A transformation of the family was initiated by Christianity. Again, in the Roman world the *paterfamilias* was supreme, but the phrase "in the Lord" is an explicit recognition that both children and parents are subject to Christ. Christ's authority is supreme in the family as in the church. The parents' responsibility is to raise their children for Christ.

***Ephesians 6:4 NKJV*<sup>4</sup>*And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.***

**In all of your relationships or roles, fulfill your responsibilities as if you were directly serving Jesus.**

***<sup>22</sup>Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. <sup>23</sup>And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, <sup>24</sup>knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup>But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.***

***<sup>1</sup>Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.***

The relationships between husbands and wives and parents and children are ordained by God from creation. So, Paul's instructions on the family represent the perfect will of God. Slavery, on the other hand, is something created by human beings and does not represent God's will from creation; the Scriptures regulate the institution without recommending it.

Kidnapping and human trafficking are both directly condemned in the NT (1 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 18:11–13). The kind of slavery practiced here in the US in years gone by would never have gotten off the ground if the Bible were truly the standard people were following.

Now, as in any other city or village in the Roman world, there would have been many slaves at Colossae; Paul treats them with dignity and appeals to them directly to honor Christ in their hearts, work, and behavior. Slaves should work heartily, not primarily to please their earthly masters but as if they were working for the Lord.

Paul is not so much encouraging the system of slavery but instead providing instructions to believing masters and slaves regarding their relationship to each other in the Lord. Such instruction clearly sowed the seeds for the eventual dismantling of this unjust socioeconomic structure at a later time.

The Law demanded that slaves eventually be set free. (Ex 21:2, Lev 25:40)  
Servants had to be treated with proper respect. (Ex 21:20, 26)  
Slaves who escaped were not to be returned to their masters. (Deu 23:15-16)

***1 Corinthians 7:20-23 NKJV*** <sup>20</sup>Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. <sup>21</sup>Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. <sup>22</sup>For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup>You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

By way of application, these passages would apply directly to employers and employees today. Business relationships such as these are spiritual relationships – they come under the authority of Christ. So we'll consider how that might look here in a moment.

**In all of your relationships or roles, fulfill your responsibilities as if you were directly serving Jesus.**

## Conclusions:

The relationships we touched on today pertained to family (husband and wife, parent and child) and they pertained to work (employer and employee). When we put together work and family, we've pretty much got life covered – everything else is decoration. But all of these aspects of life need to come under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best way to view all of this is against the pattern of Creation-Fall-Redemption.

**Creation:** The husband-wife relationship and the ability to have children were there in God's original plan – before the fall. That means these relationships were part of the "very good" that God pronounced over all of His work. God made them with some kind of ideal in mind. Similarly, God put the man in the garden to tend and to keep it. He made the man and woman His representatives to rule over the earth that He had made. Work was part of the original "very good" as well as the family. Were it not for sin, the world would have been a thoroughly beautiful, pleasant place. We can still see huge traces of God's original intent.

**Fall:** But all of this was distorted by the fall. The ground now brought up thorns and thistles instead of wonderful fruit. Childbearing was now a painful experience. We might add that parent-child relationships were now equally distorted by sin. The human race ended up being at odds with one another, fighting and oppressing one another instead of working together for the glory of God. Wars and slavery, death and disease became the norm. The whole creation groans due to the entrance of sin.

**Redemption:** Then came Jesus. He died and rose again to save us from all of that. The victory has been won and we now have eternal life. So now what? Do we sit around and wait for Jesus to return or till we die, whichever comes first? Uh, no.

We remain God's representatives, created in His image. Now we have to take all of these relationships and responsibilities that we have and bring them under His authority. The challenge we have before us is to examine each relationship that we have and each role that we fulfill and do whatever we do for the glory of God. Consider these verses again:

***Colossians 3:23-24 NKJV** <sup>23</sup>And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, <sup>24</sup>knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*

- Ideally, Christians ought to be the best husbands, wives, parents and children on earth – the most loving, the most cooperative, the most compassionate, the most understanding of the other person's needs. I wish that Christian families were always the best families to be a part of.
- They ought to be the best employers and employees – the most fair and the hardest-working. I wish that every time someone needed a job done, the best company they could find was run by Christians – or the best person they could hire would be a Christian.
- Most people we encounter from day to day have no idea what the Bible says. They have no idea who Jesus really is. Your job is to go out there into the real world of home and family, business and work and use your life to make Jesus look good to a lost world. They need to see life as God intended it, before the fall and after the redemption. Christ is risen and He is coming soon.

(Resources used: Victor Bible Background Commentary, IVP Bible Background Commentary, ESV Study Bible, Barnes' Notes on the NT, Bible Knowledge Commentary, International Bible Commentary, New Bible Commentary on the Whole Bible)