

# The Rest of Colossians

M. W. Bassford, 11-2-14

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon on the first two and a half chapters of Colossians. When I studied the text, that happened to be the way it divided up logically, so I couldn't really cover the whole book unless I wanted to spend more than an hour doing so. This morning, though, I've decided to come back and finish the job. In the first place, it seems like a shame to me to leave the last chapter and a half of Colossians un-preached. Second, Scott Taylor mentioned to me that the young-adult class had some questions last quarter about the roles of husband and wife in marriage, and Colossians 3 is one of the texts that addresses the subject. With these things in mind, then, let's turn our attention to studying the rest of Colossians.

## Family Relationships

The first context that we're going to examine here has to do with relationships in the family, and our consideration of it will also serve to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper. Logically speaking, our study of the text has to begin with **THE BASIC PRINCIPLE** that Paul is applying to all of these different relationships. It appears in Colossians 3:17. You probably don't remember, but Colossians 3:17 was the last verse that I discussed in the previous Colossians sermon, and in many ways, it functions as a bridge between the doctrinal subject matter of the early part of Colossians and the applications of the latter part.

Often, when we consider what it means to do all in the name of the Lord, we think of our practice as a church. That's certainly a legitimate application of the passage, but it's not really where Paul is going with this. Instead, all of Paul's applications of this principle are individual in nature.

This, friends, is critical for us to recognize and acknowledge. We need to honor Jesus as King in our assemblies, yes, but we also need to honor Him as King in our homes. If we don't do this, if we go home from services and treat our families like dirt and expect them to serve us instead of the other way around, we demonstrate that we have utterly missed the point. If we don't "do all in the name of the Lord" in our homes, we really aren't obeying Him anywhere.

Paul's specific applications of this principle begin with **WIVES**. Colossians 3:18 states God's will quite simply. This is one of those passages that many modern Americans would prefer to write out of the Bible. The attitude of many women to this text is, "I'm just as good as he is. Why should I submit to him?" That objection, though, confuses worth with role. Men and women are equal in value in the eyes of God, but despite that intrinsic equality, God has provided different roles for each. That different role doesn't demean women, any more than Christ was demeaned by putting on flesh and dwelling among us.

However, it is necessary that wives willingly assume this role. If a wife does not, she is asserting her equal headship in her marriage, and a marriage with two heads is about like a car with two steering wheels. It's likely headed for a wreck. Even then, though, it is the wife's responsibility to submit, not the husband's responsibility to subject her. The text doesn't say, "Husbands, make your wives submit." It's not our role to lord it over our wives, any more than Christ lorded it over His disciples during His ministry. This passage is between a Christian woman and her God, and it's her responsibility to make sure she obeys.

From wives, Paul moves on to **HUSBANDS**. Look at Colossians 3:19. Once again, this is something we must consider in the light of v. 17. A few moments ago, I talked about the husband as the head of the household, and there's a sense in which that's true, but the real head in all of our households must be Jesus Christ. The husband doesn't rule the roost. The Lord Jesus does, and He wants His brothers to live the way He did. Never in His dealings with His church has Jesus ever done anything for His own benefit. Instead, He seeks our benefit, and even His instructions for us are for our own good, not His.

The behavior of the Lord is the model for the Christian husband. He must constantly put the good of his wife and children before his own good. He must constantly sacrifice himself to make their lives better. What's more, Paul notes, he must do these things without bitterness. I think it's easy for us men to get to feeling sorry for ourselves sometimes. We feel like our wives aren't treating us as well as we treat them, and from that mindset of self-pity, we quickly become frustrated and embittered against them.

When we start thinking that way, though, we're missing out on the implications of the example of Jesus. We don't love and serve our families because we expect to be recognized and honored for it. We love

and serve our families because it's the right thing to do. If we get recognition and respect, so much the better, but if not, so what? Our wives cannot affect the responsibilities we have to God.

Paul next addresses **CHILDREN**. Consider Colossians 3:20. This too is not a particularly popular idea in modern American culture. Teenage and youthful rebellion has practically attained cult status in our society. All kinds of TV shows and movies send the message that parents, particularly fathers, are clueless, and that young people have to stand up for themselves by rejecting what those boring old people have to say.

This, however, is the opposite of God's plan for the young man and the young woman of God. The world might say reject and turn away, but God's word says listen and obey. This is something that younger Christians must do first of all for wisdom's sake. My old mentor Max Dawson likes to say that if people don't mess up their lives by the time they turn 22, generally they'll be OK. All of us who are older than 22, though, have seen things go the other way. I myself have seen my peers, and even those who are younger than I am, make disastrous choices with sex, drugs, alcohol, and running with the wrong crowd. One of the kids I knew in junior high school is in prison today as an accessory to murder. The point is that when your folks say, "Stay away from that guy. He's trouble," they probably know what they're talking about.

However, the authority of parents is not merely persuasive. Even if we think our parents are clueless idiots, and are utterly, completely wrong about this particular issue, God still says, "Obey them in all things." Unless they command us to violate the law of Christ, either we obey them, or we sin in our disobedience.

After this, Paul speaks to **FATHERS**, and indeed to parents generally. Let's read Colossians 3:21 together. It probably says some things about me that I don't want to admit that I had to think about this one for a little while to figure out what it meant. I think what Paul is warning us against here is negative parenting. This is an extremely easy trap for us to fall into. We ignore our kids when they aren't getting into trouble and yell at them when they do something we don't like, so that 100 percent of the feedback they get from us is negative. When we behave in this way, we can unwittingly do terrible damage to our children. I've heard it said that it takes 10 compliments to ease the sting of one criticism. What do you think happens when we reverse that ratio? I know Christians who have been out from under the parental thumb for 20 years or more who still bear the scars from that experience. They often have dismal self-esteem, have difficulty relating to others, and generally think much less of their own abilities than they should. They carry a lifelong burden of discouragement because of the way they were raised. It is certainly important for us as parents to correct our children, yes. However, we must remember that affection and praise are equally important.

Before the Lord's Supper this morning, let's first of all remember Jesus. He was the greatest of all men ever to walk the earth, yet He came, lived, and died as a servant. His every action was marked by His constant love for us. While we do this, though, let's consider Him as our example. We are called to be like Jesus in the way we treat our husbands, our wives, our parents, and our children. Are we following Him in these crucial family relationships, or are we following ourselves? Let's reflect on this as we partake.

## Other Relationships

Having examined the home, Paul next turns his attention to the other relationships in the lives of Christians. The first group Paul addresses, and, interestingly, the one that gets the most ink, is **SERVANTS**. Read with me from Colossians 3:22-25. Before we delve into the content of this passage, let's spend a moment reminding ourselves of its context. The "servants" that we're talking about here are actually slaves. However, our experience of slavery in the antebellum American South emphatically does not apply here. 2000 years ago, it was common for non-Romans to sell themselves into slavery as a path toward Roman citizenship, and most slaves were freed by their owners around the age of 30. Slaves could earn money during the period of their servitude. Even though slaves were still legally property, the entire institution was generally much more humane than the New-World version.

Because of this, the relationship between slave and master was much more like the relationship between employee and employer today, and we can easily apply Paul's teachings to ourselves. He tells us first of all that we should be concerned not with impressing our employers, but with impressing God. Fooling the boss is often easy. When I worked for Wal-Mart, one of my co-workers had discovered essentially a secret room on the premises of the mall next door, and he would disappear there for hours at a time. However, we can do nothing to escape the notice of God, and He is well aware when we're slacking.

Second, in our work, we should have our eyes fixed on eternity. Some people have the attitude that they want to earn as much money as possible by working as little as possible. They want to cheat their bosses. For Christians, though, the way that our bosses reward us is almost superfluous. The reward that truly concerns us is the reward of our inheritance in heaven, and nobody is going to be able to loaf his way through the pearly gates. We serve our masters well because we're already committed to serving God well.

Paul also has some instructions for **MASTERS**. Consider Colossians 4:1. This is directly addressed to slaveowners, just as the previous text was addressed to slaves, but here too, we find plenty of application. In America today, it seems like the old conceptions of integrity are breaking down. Employees too often only do what their employers force them to do, but on the other hand, an awful lot of employers watch their employees like hawks, constantly looking for ways to coerce them into greater and greater productivity. A year or two ago, Jeff Norris told me that his company put GPS units on all their trucks, so that they can tell what those drivers are doing literally every minute of every day.

Paul, by contrast, suggests an entirely different method of management. He encourages masters first to be just and second to be fair. It's not godly for the Christian employer to seek to enrich himself at his employees' expense. It's fair to expect workers to work hard, but it's equally fair to share with them the results of their hard work. In the long run, loyalty and decency are far more effective management tools than coercion and fear. Besides, harsh and cruel masters can expect equal harshness from their Master in heaven.

Next, Paul endorses **PRAYER** as an important element of the Colossians' relationship with Paul himself. Look at Colossians 4:2-4. I believe there's both a specific and a general application here. The first is that as Christians, we should constantly pray for those who are working to spread the gospel. Certainly, I myself would always appreciate the prayers of the brethren here, both that I would have opportunities for the word and that I would be able to take full advantage of those opportunities.

Even beyond that, though, prayer should be an important part of all of our relationships. We should pray for our families and tell them so. We should pray for other Christians and tell them so. We should pray for our friends and other outsiders in any kind of trouble and tell them that we are praying for them. In my experience, expressions like that are nearly always appreciated. We should always be a people of prayer.

Finally, Paul describes how we should interact with **OUTSIDERS**. He makes this point in Colossians 4:5-6. Even though Paul doesn't say so explicitly, it's clear that he has spiritual interactions in mind here. He tells us first that we are to walk in wisdom toward non-Christians. This means, I think, that we need to live our lives with the constant awareness that we are ambassadors for Christ. It's possible that we may be the first members of the Lord's church that a particular outsider has ever met, which means that their view of first-century Christians will be based on their interactions with us. This is true whether we are loving, humble, and sincere, or loud, proud, and hypocritical. People are always watching us, so we must always be mindful of our actions. If we are not, our thoughtlessness will harm the Lord's church.

Second, we must take care to adopt gracious speech, particularly when the conversation turns to religious matters. As Paul says in Romans 12, so far as it is possible with us, we must be at peace with all men. In many ways, this calls for a balancing act. Because we are pledged to Jesus, there are many times when silence is simply not going to be possible if we are going to stay faithful to Him. We're responsible for speaking up like He did. However, we must also make sure that when we do speak up, we speak in a thoughtful, loving, and godly way. If somebody's going to get mad at us, let's make sure they get mad because they don't like what the Bible says, not because they don't like the way we presented it.

### **Closing Thoughts**

In the final portion of our time together, we're going to look at the closing thoughts that Paul offers to the Colossians. The first of these concerns two brethren, **TYCHICUS AND ONESIMUS**. Let's read from Colossians 4:7-9. As with many of the things that Paul says at the ends of his epistles, this comment provides us with some insight into what the first-century church was like. Tychicus is one of Paul's more minor companions, and he shows up in several places in the New Testament. In this particular case, he's serving as Paul's mailman and a little bit more. In addition to carrying the epistle itself, he's supposed to clue the Colossians in to what Paul is doing. Interestingly enough, we see similar things said about him in Ephesians 6. This, combined with the similarity between the content of Ephesians and Colossians, leads us to conclude that both were written by Paul at the same time, probably during his first imprisonment in Rome.

The presence of Onesimus likewise provides us with valuable evidence about the authenticity of Colossians. Unlike Tychicus, Onesimus has an entire book of the Bible written about him: the epistle to Philemon. From that letter, which contains references to many of the same brethren mentioned in Colossians, we learn that Onesimus is a runaway slave who has encountered Paul, probably in Rome, and been useful to him there. Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, with a gentle plea to Philemon to free him. Because Paul mentions that Onesimus is a member of the church in Colossae, we can conclude that Philemon is too, and that Onesimus comes bearing Paul's Epistle to Philemon. Details like this reaffirm our conviction that Colossians and Philemon both truly were written by Paul.

On a more practical level, Onesimus's behavior provides a useful model for us. However we may feel about slavery today, the fact remains that slavery was part of the laws of the Roman Empire. Even so useful a work as ministering to Paul was not an excuse for Onesimus to remain in Rome in violation of the law. So too today, friends, we have a responsibility to submit to our government in the name of Christ. We don't have the right to break laws or dishonor the government simply because we find it expedient.

Next, Paul mentions a number of **OTHER BRETHREN**. Look at Colossians 4:10-14. Here too, we encounter a number of familiar names: Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. These men are linked to a number of New-Testament stories. Aristarchus was a man from Thessalonica who accompanied Paul at least during his third missionary journey and his journey to Rome. Mark is John Mark, a close associate of Peter who abandoned Paul and Barnabas during the first missionary journey but later proved himself useful and wrote the gospel of Mark. Epaphras was the preacher who had first brought the gospel to the region of Colossae, but like Paul had been arrested and imprisoned for the cause of Christ. Luke is of course the author of Luke and Acts, a brother who was with Paul during part of his second missionary journey, along with the last part of the third journey and the journey to Rome. Finally, Demas was at this point a faithful Christian, but during Paul's second imprisonment, he would abandon him for the world.

As I consider these things, I can't help but be struck by the similarity between us and our ancient brethren. I don't know about you, but whenever I meet a Christian I hadn't known before, one of the first things I do is compare notes to see if we have any friends in common. "Do you know Brother So-and-So?" "Yes, I do—we worshiped together for three years back in the late 1990s."

Here, we see evidence that those connections were just as important 2000 years ago. What is more, this evidence also confirms the essential truth of the gospel. The story of the New Testament is the story of real, flesh-and-blood people, ordinary people like us. However, they happened to live in an amazing time and see amazing things. Because everything we read about their connections with each other has the ring of truth to it, we can read what they say about Jesus and the mighty power of God with greater assurance too.

Finally, Paul concludes the book with some important words about **SHARING LETTERS**. Look at Colossians 4:15-18. This text primarily concerns the church in Laodicea. This is hardly a surprise; both Laodicea and Colossae were cities on the river Lycus, and they were only about 11 miles apart. I'm sure the churches in Laodicea and Colossae had a lot of friendly interaction, just as we will with the churches in Lockport or Downers Grove. Paul, though, gives them some additional instruction. First, they are supposed to send their letter on to the Laodiceans. Second, they are to read Paul's letter from the Laodiceans.

This text tells us a couple of things. First, it shows that we don't have all of the letters that were written in the first century. Obviously, our Bibles don't contain Paul's epistle to the Laodiceans, and even ancient sources fail to indicate that they had such a letter. Presumably, God didn't think it necessary to preserve the content of the letter, so that we still have "all things pertaining to life and godliness."

Second, this comment shows the attitude of first-century Christians to passing on the writing of inspired writers. There are denominations out there that want to take the credit for assembling the Bible, based on church councils hundreds of years after Paul lived and died. However, we see from this text that the process of transmitting those texts began immediately. Just think what we would do today. If we got a letter from a modern-day apostle Paul, we'd have that thing on the Internet in half an hour. In the same way, our brethren 2000 years ago would have been just as diligent to share that information with the technology available to them. This is why we have more manuscripts of the books of the New Testament than we do of any other ancient work. Those manuscripts were widely available right after the books were written.