



SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 3:18-4:1

To understand how submission and Godly leadership are played out in common relationships.

Mastering the Role

Part of what makes a great story is good character development. When you watch a TV series or read a book where there is time to really develop a story well, you begin to notice that every great character has a role they are supposed to play. Consider *Lord of the Rings*. Frodo is tasked with taking the ring of power to be destroyed, but he can't do it alone. His dearest friend, Samwise Gamgee, goes along with him. He has the Ranger, Aragorn (and the heir to the throne), who is great at tracking others and uses the sword well. He has Gimli, a dwarf with strength and an ax. He is accompanied by Legolas, an elf, who is an archer. Of course no great adventure is without a mage; Gandalf the Grey (later, the White). They all play a role. If one of them attempted to act in a different role, they likely would not have been successful. It's the execution of their role that makes them successful.

Colossians 3:18 through 4:1 considers several different social roles that nearly everyone would have fallen into, and breaks down how one is to successfully execute each of these roles. Below is a breakdown of the different types of relational roles prevalent then (and now, as well).

Family Roles

Colossians 3:18-21 addresses the several potential roles of a family. Beginning first with the covenant of marriage, and then continuing towards those who have children. This passage strongly mirrors the fifth and

sixth chapters of Ephesians as well, and so as we outline these relational and social roles, we will observe both sources.

WIVES

The first role Paul addresses is that of the wives. He says simply, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” The word submit here means, “to be subordinate under.” It’s in the middle voice, a voice we do not carry in the English language. In English we have an active voice where the subject does the action, and a passive voice where the subject is receiving the action. The middle voice is different. It means that the action is being done by the subject (the wife in this instance), but that it is being done with the interest of the wife in mind. In other words, the submission of the wife is purely voluntary, not under compulsion, and for her own benefit. Paul includes, “as is fitting in the Lord.” This kind of submission is not common in a non-Christian setting, but is what God desires in the home.

A few things should be added here. For one, this does not reflect a lack of value in the woman. God loves both men and women equally. Both of them have equal value and worth in the sight of God. These roles then, do not represent a hierarchy of worth but Divine design. The husband is head of the home in the same way that Christ is head of the church (Eph. 5:23). Secondly, the husband is never to try and forcefully compel his wife to submit. This submission, as mentioned above, is voluntary. The husband’s role is not to rule over the wife, but to love her. Third, this is a role meant for a wife before her husband, and him alone. Christian submission is called for between all believers (Eph. 5:21), but a special kind of submission is called for in the covenant of marriage. What that means then, is that women are *not* to submit to just *any* man. The notion that women are to be submissive to all men is simply not the whole story. Women are to submit to men, and men are to submit to women (Eph. 5:21).

HUSBANDS

Likewise, as wives submit to their husbands, husbands are to do two things. For one, they are to love their wives. The Greek verb for love here is ἀγαπάω, the verbal form of the Greek word ἀγάπη (agape), the highest form of love. This is not merely a love out of carnal desire or a love for self-seeking motives, but a selfless and sacrificial love that considers the wife before himself. That is the kind of love that compels submission. In other words, the husband is to love his wife in such a way that she desires to submit to him. Often (but not always), the lack of submission from a wife to her husband is a reflection of the lack of loving leadership he is providing. Paul includes the additional command, “and do not be harsh with them,” to reinforce the idea that husbands are not to be domineering. If husbands are head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, one must consider how Christ leads and loves His bride; by dying (Eph. 5:25).

Much attention is given to the wife’s role of submission in modern evangelicalism, despite the fact that the Bible places the weight of responsibility on the man to a far greater degree. Men are responsible for the spiritual pedigree of the home, and they are held accountable for the way they lead their families. Not only are they to love their wives sacrificially, but they are to seek to maintain her purity (Eph. 5:26-27) nurture their wives (Eph. 5:28-39), and cherish her above all else (Eph. 5:29). This kind of leadership does not imply that he should never ask her opinion or listen to her concerns. On the contrary, Godly leadership in the home requires someone who listens well.

The summation of the marriage relationship is profoundly important. Paul says, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” In other words, the marriage tells a story to the world about Jesus and the church. Every marriage tells a story, but the question is: “Does your marriage tell the truth, or a lie?” Paul’s message is clear: a marriage will tell the truth about the relationship between Christ and

the church insofar as the roles are lived out. If Christians decide to define the role of husband and wife by worldly standards, the spiritual picture being painted is skewed. Only in these Godly roles can the marriage really exalt Christ.

CHILDREN

That Paul addresses children here leads the reader to believe that this letter to the Colossian church was meant to be read in a public assembly (or church worship service). Children played a role in the structure of the Christian family. The word for obedience is not the same word for “submit” as found in verse 18, but is actually stronger. Paul quotes the fifth commandment in the Ephesians account to add more gravity to his exhortation to kids (Eph. 6:2). That means that obedience to parents is also an act of obedience to the Heavenly Father. It also means that obedience is expected up until the child is no longer under the jurisdiction of the parent. In the ancient world, jurisdiction never really ended. Even grown children with families of their own were subject to their parents. In our modern, western world, our households and even our culture are not arranged in this manner. Therefore, the child would be subject to the parents up until they are independent and recognized as such.

One seemingly troubling portion of this passage needs to be addressed. Paul says, “obey your parents *in everything*.” Naturally, this raises the question of abusive or illegal scenarios. It would be a stark contradiction to understand this passage to mean that even in those cases, children should obey. It is incompatible with the heart of God and the narrative of Scripture to think that God would desire children to follow the instruction of their parents, even in the event that is ungodly or illegal. We are called to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1), and yet we see evidence of rebellion when those authorities require sinful action (Ex. 1:15-20). In the same way, we cannot expect that “everything” entails things that the Scripture explicitly speaks against.

FATHERS

After having dealt with the role of children, Paul visits the governing authority over the children. The structure of the home includes both parents in the act of child rearing, but the father is the head of the home since he is also the husband of the wife, and therefore the command is directed towards him (once again, solidifying the weight of responsibility that falls on the man). Fathers are told to not, “provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col. 3:21). The word for “provoke” here is the Greek word ἐρεθίζω (erethizō), and it means, “to challenge in an irritating manner.” Parents can and should challenge their kids to think about things with discernment, use wisdom, and follow the direction of the Scripture. However, to challenge them in a manner that exacerbates them is not warranted nor biblical. The goal of raising children is to introduce them to the beauty of grace and the destructive nature of sin in hopes that they would ultimately be born again. Anything that stirs up rebellion and antagonizes unto sin is not permissible, “lest they become discouraged (or embittered)” (Col. 3:21).

Social Roles

After discussing the family roles, Paul moves to a prominent (and sometimes problematic) relationship in the social realm: masters and servants. Slavery in the ancient world was quite different than the colonial version that many in our modern world think of when they hear the word. In actuality, these relationships do fall into the same category as marriage and parenting. The ancient home often included way more than the nuclear family. Be that as it may, slavery was still fundamentally problematic because it involves one human being owning another human being and having complete control over their life. Below is a breakdown of each role.

BONDSERVANTS

Many people don't like that Paul didn't say more against the practice of slavery. However, two things should be noted. For one, Paul addresses the slave. In the same way that Paul's address to children implies some kind of value within the kingdom of God, the same can be said here. Paul does not merely acknowledge the servants, but rather he speaks directly to them. His message is also empowering, in that Paul rightly recognizes that true authority comes not from the master of the household, but the Master of Heaven (Col. 3:23-24). That would have come as a surprise to everyone reading this letter. To question the authority of the master of the home was unthinkable. Paul directs the issue of obedience in a master/slave relationship to that of the Lordship of Christ: "You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:24).

MASTERS

Beyond what he said, one should also note the quantity of words to the servants. Paul speaks to the servants for a total of 4 verses, in comparison to his message to the masters in only 1 verse. The ending exhortation to the masters almost feels unimportant. The content of what he says is important, however. He reminds the masters (as he did the servants) that Christ is above them. He commands them to be equitable and just to those who serve them, which was quite countercultural, and then gives his reasoning: "knowing that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1). The attitude of the masters towards their servants should be shaped in light of the grace that they themselves have received.

This brings up an interesting point that is integral to understanding this portion of Colossians. Paul is speaking to masters who are Christians. As mentioned above, Paul has come under great scrutiny for not dismantling slavery in his time, but that is not entirely true. Paul recognized that to undo a social structure that had existed for hundreds of years before his time and was prevalent in many parts of the world would be foolish and impossible. What he could accomplish, however, was a sort of redefining the practice, and that is his aim here (as well as in *Philemon*). Christians who owned slaves would be reminded that they are to treat their slaves as they themselves have been treated by Christ. This subtle shift in thinking leads to sweeping reform. Eventually, they begin to see their servants as brothers or sisters (Philemon 1:15-16). Submission and leadership from a distinctly Christian worldview, then, becomes the primary operating mechanism in the master/slave relationship.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Colossians 3:18. What is the command for wives in this passage? Why is this a, "fitting" thing for wives to do?

2. Read Colossians 3:19. What two commands are given to husbands in this passage?

Day Two

1. Read Colossians 3:20. What commands are given to children in this passage? Why are children commanded to do this?

2. Read Colossians 3:21. What command is given to fathers in this passage? Why are fathers commanded to do this?
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Day Three

1. Read Colossians 3:22. What command is given to bond-servants (or slaves) in this passage? How are they to fulfill this command, and how are they *not* to fulfill this command?
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2. Read Colossians 3:23-24. What additional encouragement is given to bond-servants, and why is this significant? (Hint: See above notes)
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Day Four

1. Read Colossians 3:25. What does this passage mean, in light of what Paul has just said about bond-servants?
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2. Read Colossians 4:1. What command is given to masters of bond-servants in this passage? How should their relationship with Jesus shape the way they treat their bond-servants? Why is this significant? (Hint: See above notes)
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Week 11 Discussion: Relational Submission

Colossians 3:18-4:1 discuss several well-known and prevalent relationships in the church both during Paul's time and even today to some extent (barring slavery). There are, however, work-related relationships that share many things in common to the master/slave relational structure. Talk as a group about how submission and humble leadership play out in your own life, and how counter-cultural they are in comparison to the world's standard.

1. Icebreaker: Do you think submission is good or bad in relationships, and why?
2. Do you agree with Paul's direction for wives and husbands in this passage? Why or why not? Is this a popular approach to marriage in the world?
3. Do you agree with Paul's direction for fathers in this passage? Why or why not? Do you think children would submit more, less, or the same if the parents led with humility and grace?
4. Do you agree with Paul's direction for children in this passage? Why or why not? What should kids do if their parents are asking/forcing them to do something that is illegal or harmful? How does the church play a role in this kind of scenario?
5. What is your role at work (servant or master)? How effectively do you fulfill your role?

Takeaways:

1. Relationships often are broken down into roles, and the execution of those roles dictate the health of the relationship.
2. The marriage relationship tells a story about the relationship between Christ and the church.
3. Paul did not dismantle slavery, but he did redefine it in a way that led to its ultimate demise.