

*Colossians 3:18-4:1***PREFACE**

Once again, at first blush, our text seems to take a sudden and abrupt turn. But really it does not. The easiest way to show the transition from v3:17 to the new paragraph beginning with v3:18 is to imagine a colon at the end of v17.

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father: [for example, or, like this, or, here's what that will look like]

At the time Paul wrote this, our entire passage (vv3:18-4:1) would have applied to the personal household, for slaves would have been a part of that household. Not ignoring the historical context, but making application of this passage for us today, the first paragraph (vv18-21) addresses personal family life, while the second (vv3:22-4:1) addresses the work environment—as well as, I might add, our responsibilities serving in the church and elsewhere.

We gain a clue to the perspective of this text if we note the repetition.

v18: as is fitting in the Lord

v20: this is well-pleasing to the Lord

v22: fearing the Lord

v23: as for the Lord

v24: knowing that from the Lord...it is the Lord Christ whom you serve

v4:1: you too have a Master in heaven

This higher motivation for these commands seasons the entire passage.

Read Colossians 3:18-21.

[Note: If this were a class for young adults or older teenagers, we could easily devote a session to each verse in this passage. But since it is a class for, mostly, the venerable aged—most not just married, but married a good long time, or even no longer married—I will not be getting down to the bare metal of these verses. Likewise, most in this class have happily handed down the rearing of young children to their *adult* children—even adult *grandchildren*—so we will tread lightly on that relationship as well. Even so, we are never too long in the tooth to be reminded of how God has ordained proper family life.]

vv18-19: WIVES AND HUSBANDS

I still recall my revulsion when studying the passage parallel to this in Ephesians, many years ago with my friend Dave in California.

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

Though I had been a believer since the age of 7, I had been away from the church for a number of years, and was thoroughly steeped in liberal, feminist philosophy. And when we got to that passage I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise as I mentally conjured the appalling image of a husband's foot on the neck of his whimpering, barefoot and pregnant wife. But then we *studied* the passage. And I quickly realized I had a lot to learn about God's definition of a healthy marriage, and healthy, God-honoring family life. Here is some of what I didn't realize at that first reading:

- The tense of the Greek word translated "subject to" or "submit to" shows that the submission is to be voluntary—not forced on her by a demanding, tyrannical husband.

Douglas J. Moo: It is probably significant that the household code here in Colossians urges wives to "submit" to their husbands but children and slaves to "obey" their fathers and masters, respectively. This pattern is typical, though not universal, in the NT, and suggests that the NT writers put the relationship of wife to husband in a different (and less "authoritarian") category than these others. "Obedience" naturally fits a situation in which orders are being issued, and in which the party obeying has little choice in the matter. Submission, on the other hand, suggests a voluntary willingness to recognize and put oneself under the leadership of another.
- The context shows that the wife's submission is in response to her husband's unselfish love—*agapao*, in v19. This is not romantic love; as Curtis Vaughan writes, it "denotes *caring* love, a deliberate attitude of mind that concerns itself with the well-being of the one loved." It is, to be precise, the manner of love Christ demonstrated on the cross, and demonstrates every day to the church. ([Even this call to "love" one's wife was unique in the first century.](#))

Read Ephesians 5:25.
- This behavior is becoming and proper—fitting—"in the Lord."
- If the wife is to behave toward her husband in a way "fitting in the Lord," the husband is to behave toward his wife in such a way that does not cause her to be embittered toward him—that is, he is not to treat her harshly.
- Contrary to what the ignorant of the world think, the NT teachings about the roles of husband and wife actually *elevate* the woman. In the first century—especially in the Roman world of Paul's environment—wives were mere chattel. The husband and father had unqualified, absolute rule over his wife and children. In her relationship to her husband, the wife was only marginally better than a household slave. That is demonstrably *not* the picture in the NT.

vv20-21: CHILDREN

Verses 18-19 are about the relationship between wives and husbands; vv20-21 repeat (with some adjustments) the same relationship between children and their fathers.

- We have already pointed out the difference between the wife voluntarily “submitting” and the child “obeying.”
- While we can easily understand this injunction in the context of the family with young children, Douglas Moo bravely discusses whether this applies to *adult* children as well, and suggests that it does when the adult child is “living under the protection of” the parent—a situation not uncommon these days. “But when children are no longer under the protection and care of their parents, we would suggest that, while deference and ‘honor’ are still appropriate, obedience is no longer necessarily to be expected” (Moo).
- Just as with the relationship between husband and wife, with his children the father has the responsibility to not “provoke” his children. [different word, *erethizo* (air-eth-id'-zo), from the one used in v19 regarding wives] The word translated “fathers” can refer to both parents. In the context of the first century, the emphasis on the father is appropriate; in our context today, it is appropriate to apply this to either parent. And this verse (v21) taken as a whole is saying that parents are to “raise their children in such a way that they do their utmost to avoid provoking [a] rebellious attitude in them” and not to discipline “to such an extent that they ‘lose heart’ and simply give up trying to please their parents” (Moo).

Vv3:22-4:1: SLAVES AND MASTERS
Read Colossians 3:22-4:1.

To be clear, Paul is not employing a euphemism. Slaves in the first century were a common, integral part of society. At the time there were more slaves in Rome than citizens. “Slave” is the best, most accurate translation of the word; the translation “servant” or “bond-servant”—sometimes appropriate—is the one that, at times, can be the softening euphemism. For example, in the context of the believer’s relationship to Christ, some translations may use “bond-servant,” but in truth we are *bought and paid for* by Christ’s sacrifice—lock, stock and barrel [Revelation 5:9]—which is the very definition of a slave. So Paul addresses, in vv22-25, believing slaves, whether in non-believing or Christian households.

Rather than spend our time discussing first-century slavery, however, we’ll cut right to the application for us today. While it is true that the term “slave” is appropriate regarding our relationship to Christ, unless I am mistaken it does not apply to any of our earthly relationships. So as we work through these verses let us keep in mind *both* situations:

- our responsibility to our heavenly Master as true, purchased slaves;
- our responsibility to our earthly masters or bosses, as followers of our heavenly Master.

The two cannot be separated, for our righteous behavior and diligence to earthly masters is based on our devotion to our heavenly Master.

I would like to approach this paragraph, first, by defining all the terms, making sure we understand what Paul is saying, then, second, circle back and summarize the application for us today.

v22: Sincerity

Read v22.

The Greek word translated “obey” in v22 (slaves to master) is the same one used in v20 (children to parents). So parents, you are to be as obedient to your boss as you expect your children to be obedient to you.

In English it is not obvious that Paul contrasts the slave’s earthly masters to his heavenly Master (Lord or God) by using the same word:

kyrios = from kuros (supremacy); **supreme in authority**, i.e. (as noun) controller; by implication Mr. (as a respectful title) :- God, Lord, master, Sir.

But here’s the difference: while we are to “obey” our earthly masters/bosses, we are to “fear” our heavenly Master.

fearing = *phobeo* = from <G5401> (phobos); to frighten, i.e. (passive) to be alarmed; by analogy **to be in awe of, i.e. revere** :- be (+ sore) afraid, fear (exceedingly), **reverence**.

The central message of v22 is that our work is to be performed with “sincerity of heart,” rather than with “external service” or “eyeservice.”

“Eye-service” is the best literal translation from the Greek, but does little to help us understand what is meant. The NASB “external service” doesn’t help much either.

ophthalmodoulia (of-thal-mod-oo-lay'-ah) = from <G3788> (ophthalmos) and <G1397> (douleia); **sight-labor, i.e. that needs watching** (remissness) :- eye-service.

What this compound word means is best captured by the NIV:

and do it, **not only when their eye is on you** and to win their favor,

but with sincerity of heart

Once again the KJV gives us the most literal translation with “singleness” (of heart).

haplotes = from <G573> (haplous); **singleness, i.e. (subjective) sincerity (without dissimulation or self-seeking)**, or (objective) generosity (copious bestowal) :- bountifulness, liberal (-ity), simplicity, singleness. [“The ‘single’ eye (Matthew 6:22) has a concentrated focus that leads a person consistently in the the same direction. So, here, ‘singleness of heart’ (KJV) refers to a focused and unvarying concentration of the will that produces consistent conduct.” (Moo)]

vv23-24

Read vv23-24.

The word translated “heartily” in most translations is the Greek *psyche* (soo-kay’) most often translated “soul” or “life.” I think the *Young’s Literal Translation* captures it well:

and all, whatever ye may do—out of soul work—as to the Lord, and not to men,

The idea here is not the *amount* of effort, but the *motivation behind* the effort; not the external, but the internal. The Christian's soul belongs to the Lord, so we do our work for *Him*, not for men.

Verse 24 gives one reason we are to do this—
"knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance."

Imagine the joy with which this would fill the heart of a first-century slave. He or she would have no hope of *earthly* reward, but in Christ they could look forward to a far more substantial *heavenly*, eternal reward.

The Christian has only one true Master, and He is the one who hands out the rewards. Again, however, the almost universal translation of the Greek *douleuo* (dool-yoo'-oh) as "serve," does not quite capture the strength of the word, which means, literally, "to be a slave to," "to be in bondage."

v25

Read v25.

In Ephesians, Paul explicitly addresses this to masters—

Read Ephesians 6:9.

—but here it is implied that it is addressed to slaves. So between the two passages we can safely conclude that no matter which you are, slave or master, the heavenly scales of justice are not weighted to one side or the other. No extra helping of pity or forbearance is shown the slave, and no favoritism is shown the higher-ranking master.

v4:1

And speaking of masters, this paragraph ends with an explicit injunction for them after another of those unfortunate chapter breaks, in v1 of Chapter Four.

Read v4:1.

Masters (*kyrios*) of slaves are to grant them

justice = *dikaïos* (dik'-aye-yos) = from <G1349> (dike); **equitable (in character or act)**; by implication innocent, holy (absolute or relative) :- **just**, meet, **right** (-eous).

and

fairness = *isotes* = **likeness** (in condition or proportion); by implication equity :- **equal (-ity)**.

[Not "as equals," but "fairly"—fair treatment of a slave or servant.]

Why? Because every earthly *kyrios* has a heavenly *Kyrios* who will judge him accordingly.

vv3:22-4:1: APPLICATION

Now, how should we apply this to our lives today? It is a pretty straightforward migration from slave to employee. But I would suggest a third application:

Believers today (at least in the United States) are not slaves to an earthly master, but we *are* slaves to a *heavenly* Master (if that makes you uneasy, substitute “servant”). So the instruction in this passage applies both to your work for an earthly employer and your work performed in the name of your heavenly Master—Jesus. That is, this applies to the pastor behind the pulpit, the elder or deacon, the teacher, the janitor, the occasional helper at church work-day, the one who ministers at the nursing home—anyone who does anything in the name of Jesus, which should include *every* Christian.

v22

- Be an obedient, trustworthy, reliable worker.
- Do good work even when no one is watching—even when no one will be able to tell the difference.
- Ground your work in a sincere heart. Don't just go through the motions; sincerely *want* to do a good job.

vv23-24

- Do all this, first, because of the lordship of Christ in your life. Be a good worker out of your love and reverence for the Lord. Your earthly boss may reward your work with a paycheck that lasts only a few days, but the Lord will reward your work with an eternal crown. Remember that no matter what you are doing, you are ultimately serving Christ Jesus.

v25

- And no matter who you are, no matter how high or low your position, you will be judged by your work.

v4:1

- If *you* are an earthly boss or supervisor, treat your employees with justice, with fairness, with kindness, for *your* Boss is watching.