

Relationships that Please the Lord
Colossians 3:18-4:1
Newton Bible Church
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One cold winter night in Epworth, England, the church bell awakened the townspeople. To their dismay, the sky was illuminated by a house engulfed in flames – the house of a well-loved family in their town. A crowd gathered to fight the fire, but it was too late. The house had become an unquenchable inferno.

Samuel and Susanna had escaped the flames, along with six of their children. Soon it was discovered that one child was missing. No one could find Johnny. Realizing the worst, Samuel headed toward the blaze, only to be held back from certain death by the townspeople.

And so, in silent torture, they all stood by. Then someone in the crowd shouted. “Look!” A little face had appeared in an upstairs window. Johnny had awakened and, unable to escape the flames, had made his way to the window. In an instant, two men ran toward the house. One climbed upon the shoulders of the other as they formed a human ladder up to the child. The heat was so intense their clothes began to smoke. But within moments the child was pulled through, brought to safety on the arms of a living ladder.

The little guy that was saved that night was none other than John Wesley, the man God used to shake the world in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Years later Wesley wrote, “That night I was plucked as a brand from the burning.”

Why do I tell this story? Because it is a picture of our culture, a culture which has become a towering inferno. There is another true story about a burning house which illustrates how our culture is incinerating relationships.

Once again, there was a fire beyond quenching. Standing back, the crowd watched as the flames raged out of control. Then, unexpectedly, above the roaring crackle of the fire came the faint cries of a child. As the fire grew more intense, the cries became more compelling.

Suddenly a man broke loose from the crowd and raced toward the house. Before a stunned audience, this hero disappeared into the flames. Seconds seemed like hours as they waited for him to reappear. And then the cries of the child stopped.

Momentarily, the man emerged through the doorway with a bundle in his arms. Then, overcome by the smoke, he fell to the ground. Out of his arms tumbled the bundle. A large safety box. The man had risked his life to rescue his life savings.

What sort of man would close his ears to the screams of a dying child for the sake of money? Only a morally and spiritually impoverished man. A man reflecting current culture!

If we are to have relationships that are pleasing to our preeminent Lord, we will have to avoid being conformed to our culture and allow Him to help us follow His plan for all of our relationships. That plan is reflected in our text.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 (ESV)

¹⁸Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²²Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. **4** Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

We see here that the principle of divinely ordained authority and submission is the central thought in Paul's instructions regarding relationships that are pleasing to the Lord. That principle has been under attack from the Garden of Eden to this very day. Paul reminded the Colossians that since Christ is preeminent, there is no aspect of life that is not subject to Christ's rule, nor any aspect He cannot renew to conform to that rule. The authority and submission patterns that He has designed into the fabric of His creation must be followed or relational carnage will be the result. Our text applies that principle in three arenas of relationship, starting in the home and moving into the workplace.

1. Instructions to wives and husbands (3:18-19)

a. Wives: submit to your husband (18)

- In a culture that screams, "I am the boss of me!" this seemingly straightforward command is under attack in nearly all circles, even among those who claim to be evangelicals.
 - Some claim that all of Paul's teaching on this theme is not Spirit-inspired, but reflects his chauvinistic, rabbinic attitude toward women. These people seek to usurp God's role, deciding for themselves which parts of Scripture are inspired.
 - Others argue that Paul is mistakenly commenting on Genesis 2 rather than Genesis 1. Genesis 1, they argue, teaches the equality of sexes and is inspired. Genesis 2, which implies the headship of man, is viewed as a later uninspired Rabbinic gloss (picking a choosing again!).
 - Others insist that Paul's teaching on authority and submission was cultural and does not apply to our culture.
 - Interestingly, sets of household rules like our text were quite common in both the Greek and the Jewish worlds of Paul's day. Those other sets of rules had one thing in common – wives were always instructed to obey (not submit to) their husbands. Paul's instructions did not fit the culture of that day. The instructions Paul received from Christ through the Holy Spirit actually elevated women far above the expectancies of that culture!
- Another teaching of Paul on this subject reveals how the cultural argument is unsustainable.

Titus 2:1-5 (ESV)

2 But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. ² Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. ³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

- Is it cultural that older women are to teach younger women?
- Is it cultural that older women should not be gossips or drunkards?
- Is it cultural that younger women are to be sensible, sexually pure, good and kind?
- Is it cultural that women are to encourage and support one another?
- Is it cultural for a woman to love her husband?
- Is it cultural for a woman to love her children?
- None of these things are cultural. They are timeless principles. They span culture and time.
 - Then why would it be cultural for a woman to submit to her husband's leadership?
 - All of these mandates are no more cultural and no less critical than any other in God's design. This specific command also appears elsewhere in passages that are equally noncultural.
 - Paul was not enjoining the wives to follow the prevailing cultural pattern of the day but to live "as is fitting in the Lord;" or as He wrote in Titus, "that the Word of God may not be reviled."
- Much is at stake here, so we need to make sure we understand what Christ is commanding through Paul.
 - "Submit" or "Be subject" translates the Greek word *hupotasso* and means "to subject oneself. It has the idea of putting oneself under another's authority, not by compulsion, but willingly.
 - This is the same word used in Luke 2:51 to Jesus' voluntary submission to His parents.
 - It is the exact opposite of the tale we have all heard of the child that was sent to sit in the corner, and after grudgingly sitting down announced, "I may be sitting on the outside but I'm still standing on the inside!"
 - Contrary to what culture screams, when a woman submits to the loving leadership of her husband, following God's instruction for her, she is fulfilled and so is her husband.
 - Efforts to reverse or confuse this instruction destroys the blessing that God has designed wife and husband to be to each other.
 - The parallel passage in Ephesians sums it up in the word "respect." The submission wives are called to is respectful treatment of their husband's leadership.

- We are told that this is “fitting in the Lord.” The Greek form in this phrase expresses an obligation, a necessary duty. It is how God designed and commands the family to operate. When followed it is a source of great blessing to both wife and husband.
- When wives respectfully submit their husbands find it a blessing to obey the command to sacrificially love them.
- b. Husbands: love your wife (19)
 - Paul actually issued two commands to husbands. First, they must love their wives.
 - This command to husbands was just as culturally unhitched as was the command to wives. Wives were then considered property and had no legal rights to speak of. In Roman society they were not even allowed to leave the house and were to be unseen by all but their husband and children. The husband had the right to divorce the wife for any reason and even the right to pass judgment upon her and put her to death. Many, if not most, marriages were loveless, with the husband having all the rights and the wife all the duties.
 - Paul used the present tense of the imperative *agapate* in this command.
 - This commanded continuous action.
 - This defined the sort of love; the love with which they were loved by God. Agape love is selfless, self-sacrificing love that always works in the best interests of the one who is loved.
 - Paul explained this love more completely in the parallel passage in Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:25-33 (ESV)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

- Let’s think a bit about what it means to love as Christ loved the church:
 - Christ was willing to die for the church – He literally gave Himself up for her. This was an active love that was not based in the response of the beloved – when Christ gave Himself, the church had not yet responded at all!
 - This means putting her first, not an afterthought
 - Christ provided for the church – providing all she needed to be sanctified by the washing of the Word (which was also a gift from Him).
 - This means providing for all of her needs; physical, emotional & spiritual

- She needs companionship & conversation!
 - Christ is continuously working on behalf of the church, helping her become more and more what she was meant to be.
 - This means actively helping her grow
 - Christ never gives up on the church – He will present her to the Father as a holy, blameless bride when He calls her to Himself
 - This means refusing to give in to discouragement and tuning her out
 - No wonder Paul described this kind of love as loving one’s own body!
 - When you love your wife this way you nourish her!
 - When you love your wife this way you cherish her!
 - You love her even though this side of heaven she is just as imperfect as you are! Which leads to the second command to husbands:
 - Husbands must not be embittered against their wives.
 - Paul used the imperative *pikrainesthe* which could be translated “stop being bitter,” or “do not have the habit of being bitter.”
 - This term is only used two other times in the New Testament, both times in Revelation referring to something that is bitter in taste.
 - Paul tells husbands not to call their wives “honey,” and treat them like vinegar!
 - Husbands are to resist the fleshly drive to store up resentments and then take it out on their wives either through passive neglect or aggressive abuse.
 - When husbands lovingly lead and refuse to become embittered their wives find it a blessing to follow the instruction to submit to them.
 - Paul adds a helpful note in 1 Corinthians 7:33-34 where he refers to husband’s and wife’s mutual desire to please one another. The wife most pleases the husband with loving submission, while the husband most pleases the wife with loving authority.
2. Instruction to children and parents (3:20-21)
- a. Children: obey your parents (20)
- There is no doubt that the principle of authority and submission as it relates to children and parents is under vicious attack in our day, just as it has been in every culture and age.
 - When visiting our son and his family for the 4th of July, we were horrified to learn that one of our 4-year-old granddaughter’s favorite things to watch was a show about bossy babies – babies who are in charge.
 - Almost anything you watch on any screen portrays parents as inept and glorifies resisting their authority.
 - Fathers are particularly under attack – they are either fools who are ignored or bullies that are avoided.
 - Paul’s instructions are a call back to God’s design and standard.
 - The group addressed is identified by the Greek word *tekna* (children) which is a general term for children and is not limited to a specific age group.

- This term refers to any child still living in the home and under parental care and guidance.
- Paul used the present tense of the imperative *hupakoute* (be obedient) which commands a continuous obedience.
 - The obedience that is commanded is immediate and lasting
- Children are to obey in everything.
 - This is not a pick-and-choose kind of obedience, which decides whether the parents' instruction is worth following.
- God's demand that children obey parents is the school that He has designed to teach children how they are to respond to authority in every area of life.
 - This is why Scripture repeatedly teaches that children are to honor and obey their parents.

Exodus 20:12 (ESV)

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Proverbs 6:20 (ESV)

²⁰ My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (ESV)

¹⁸ "If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, ¹⁹ then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, ²⁰ and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' ²¹ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

- Lest we think this an outdated "Old Testament" idea, the New Testament teaches that disobedience to parents is a mark of the ungodly.

2 Timothy 3:2 (ESV)

² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,

- The motivation for this obedience is that this pleases the Lord
 - Just as in every other area of God designed authority and submission, the person under authority is obligated to submit/obey in everything unless it is something that violates the clear teaching of God's Word.
 - If a father commands a child to steal or lie or some other clear violation of Scripture, the child's responsibility is to respectfully decline.
 - With that single exception in mind, we must remember that these instructions are based in the fact that Christ is at work in our homes, making it possible for each member to respond properly to their assigned position.

- Children who yearn to know God’s will for their lives have this Scriptural injunction: obeying their parents is the right place to start.
- b. Parents: don’t exasperate your children (21)
 - *Pateres* (fathers) should be translated “parents” as it is in Hebrews 11:23

Hebrews 11:23 (ESV)

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

- Paul’s specific instruction to parents is not to provoke their children.
 - Provoke is from *erethizo* and means to stir up, provoke, irritate, or exasperate
 - If we phrased this in modern vernacular it would come out something like “Stop nagging your kids!”
- Failure to follow this instruction will discourage children and cause them to lose heart.
 - Parents can take the heart out of their children by failing to instruct them in the ways of the Lord with a balanced approach.
- John MacArthur suggests the following ways in which parents exasperate their children:
 - Overprotection – never allowing them any liberty; strict rules for everything. No matter what children do, overprotective parents never trust them. Because they can never gain their parents trust, children will either give up in discouragement or become rebellious. Children need rules and guidelines, but they also need to know that they can be trusted.
 - Favoritism – this may be done unwittingly by comparing a child unfavorably to siblings or classmates. If there is a favorite, the rest are frustrated.
 - Depreciating worth – communicating to any child that what they do and feel is not important convinces them that they have no worth. Refusing to listen to them is the fastest way to depreciate worth!
 - Unrealistic goals – when parents do this, nothing is ever enough; the child never feels any sense of success or full approval. Some children who experience this become so frustrated that they commit suicide.
 - Failure to show affection – Children need to have love communicated both verbally and physically. Failing to do so discourages and alienates the child.
 - Not providing for needs – Children need things like privacy, a place to relax, a place to study, their own possessions and good meals. Provision of these shows respect and care. Failure to provide children’s needs shows disrespect.
 - Lack of standards – this is the flip side of overprotection. Because children cannot handle this kind of freedom, failure to discipline or disciplining inconsistently causes them to feel insecure and unloved.
 - Criticism – a child who lives with constant criticism learns to condemn himself and find fault with others. He lives with a continual expectation of impending doom. Parents should seek to create a positive, constructive environment.
 - Neglect – the classic example in the Bible is Absalom. David’s neglect led to rebellion, civil war and Absalom’s death. Parents need to be involved in their children’s lives.

- Excessive discipline – this is the parent who abuses their children, either verbally, emotionally, or physically. Parents ought never discipline their children in anger. Rather, parents should lovingly correct their children, just as their heavenly Father does them.
- Not exasperating children is essential if parents are to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4)
- 3. Instructions to servants and masters (3:22-4:1)
 - a. Servants: obediently work for the Lord (22-25)
 - In this arena of the workplace, the principle of authority and submission is still central in Paul’s thought – the instruction to servants is “obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.”
 - “In everything” is a comprehensive phrase referring to both enjoyable and distasteful duties.
 - This required obedience is not just external lip service. Christian servants are to please the Lord by working with integrity and sincere hearts.
 - At all times they are to consider their service to be what it actually is – service for the Lord.
 - Holding God and His will and reputation in high regard is the motivation for this obedience.
 - Paul provided two reasons that servants are to obey their masters:
 - Positively – the Lord will repay them for their faithfulness. This is the inheritance mentioned here; something slaves were never allowed to obtain!
 - Negatively – the Lord will discipline without partiality in cases of disobedience.
 - The Christian servant is never to presume upon his Christianity to justify sloth or disobedience!
 - b. Masters: reverently be fair (4:1)
 - Masters are to treat their servants with the justice and fairness that they expect to receive from their Master in heaven.
 - God will judge masters who mistreat their servants, just as He will servants who fail to serve their masters.
 - One of the carriers of this letter to the Colossians was Onesimus, the runaway slave that Paul was returning to his master Philemon. These carriers were carrying a letter from Paul to that master as well.
 - In that letter Paul implored Philemon to receive Onesimus with grace; in short asking both Philemon and Onesimus to live out the principles of authority and submission underlying this set of instructions.
 - That both Philemon and Onesimus lived out these principles is evident in the collective memory of the early church that Onesimus became the pastor of the church of Colossae!

John MacArthur sums this section up this way: “If all Christians displayed the characteristics of relationships as embodied in the principles of this text, the results would be dramatic. Believers would indeed become lights shining in the darkness.”

We began by reflecting upon the fact that our culture is a raging inferno, destroying relationships in every arena of life, with its blow torch aimed specifically at the home. We have seen that our Lord has built patterns into His creation that must be followed to avoid this conflagration and to have relationships that are pleasing to Him.

- You cannot accept and follow those patterns joyfully if you are not His!

- You cannot accept and follow those patterns if you are not daily surrendering to His authority!

May God help us all to submit to our Lord and allow Him to renew all of our relationships!