

... you serve the Lord Christ

Jeremiah 2:4–13

Psalm 81:1, 10–16

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Luke 14:1, 7–14

Text: Colossians 3:18-4:1

... in the Lord. ... your acceptable duty in the Lord. ... fearing the Lord. ... as done for the Lord from the Lord you will receive the inheritance... ; you serve the Lord Christ. ... you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Introduction

What would an organizational chart of your household look like? I have discovered, because I now live alone, that some guy keeps messing up things and I am always cleaning up after him! The ‘household’ of Paul’s day was typically formed in terms of three sets of relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, slaves and masters. In the classical definition of Aristotle, the household was the basic unit of the state and the ordering of these household relationships was deemed important for society. As a consequence certain ‘household codes’ emerged among ethical and political thinkers which included a focus on the theme of the good ordering of the household and its constituent parts. These households were typically led by a male but not necessarily so as in the case of Lydia who is considered the first European convert to Christianity. (Acts 16:15) We should also keep in mind that the early church were house churches that met in homes; the church in Colossae (at least one of them) met in the house of Philemon. (Paul’s letter to the Colossians and to Philemon were delivered at the same time.)

1. Our reading today in Colossians is one of what might be called ‘household codes’ found in the New Testament. These codes follow the pattern of addressing the three principle first-century household relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, slaves and masters. The Apostle Paul offers another in his Ephesian letter (Ephesians 5:22-6:9), there is one in Peter’s first letter (1 Peter 2:18-3:7), and there are close parallels in Timothy and Titus. Given the fluid nature of households in our modern culture coupled with the rise in dominance of an ideology that eschews traditional family categories, these household codes sound strange. Besides the call for wives to be subject to their husbands, many have also criticized Paul because he did not call for the end of slavery outright.

At the outset of probing this household code I want to make some brief observations. The first is that we do not live in a first-century household structure. Paul is addressing the reality of his day. It is important to be careful to distinguish between what is timeless and what is time bound. No thinking Christian, for example, advocates that we ought to revive slavery because of the way slaves are addressed in these texts of scripture.

The second observation is the Apostle's conviction that relationships in life, including our household relationships, are to reflect our commitment to Christ as Lord. As I pointed out to you a moment ago, the lordship of Christ is mentioned no fewer than seven times in these nine verses. Clearly Paul believes that the Christ event is such that it is to permeate the whole surface of our lives. This leads me to a third observation. As we hear this text we try to discern those things that are timeless and guide us in our living now. I also observe that unlike many of the household codes of first-century world, Paul's requirement for husbands, fathers and masters reveals a reciprocal focus in household relationships that is distinctive to the New Testament. Furthermore when we look at any one text of scripture we must be careful to set it in the context of the entire gospel.

2. "Wives, be subject to your husbands," writes Paul, "as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly." These requirements that Paul makes of wives and husbands assumes the larger context of what the Bible teaches about marriage. A careful reading of Scripture's creation narratives informs us that the distinction between male and female is the only distinction (among all that differentiate people today) that God has embedded irrevocably in the creation itself.

In the Genesis accounts, the creation of land, water, vegetation, planets and animals is pronounced "good", whereas the creation of man and woman is pronounced "very good" and is "blessed." In other words, the man-woman complementarity is built into the creation. This complementarity isn't an accident of history or a social convention. Neither is it inherently inhibiting. Marriage is a God-ordained relationship that can't be duplicated. Its companionship is uniquely our creaturely comfort and consolation. According to God's plan and purpose marriage is the union of one man and one woman in a lifelong bond that death alone terminates.

In the introduction to the wedding service I read that marriage "is not to be entered into lightly". Indeed it is not, for marriage is the most significant human relationship any man or woman will ever enter upon. So momentous is marriage,

so telling, so pervasive is it that it penetrates to our innermost core as no other human bond can. God deems marriage the most pertinent metaphor for his most intimate relationship with his people. Throughout scripture marriage is the commonest analogy for faith. So momentous is marriage, again, that both it itself and that faith of which it speaks metaphorically are described as “mystery”. Mystery, according to our Hebrew foreparents, is never something vague or abstract or spooky; rather it is everyday concrete reality, even as this concreteness remains profound—so profound that while it can be pointed to, experienced, commended, and described it can never be explained, much less explained away. No words can finally do justice to mystery.

You will notice that Paul addresses wives here in particular not women in general. The relationship of marriage is in view; keep in mind the profound nature of marriage that scripture upholds. The word translated ‘be subject’ is considered a positive thing in the New Testament. It is used of Jesus to speak of his relationship to the one he calls the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28). Paul uses it of Christians generally when he says that we are to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21) This is what it means to obey Jesus and love one another. At its heart is the idea of regard for the other; giving yourself to and for the other. Notice it is ‘be subject’ not ‘be subjugated’. This is to be the action of a person freely giving themselves for the other.

Please note the reciprocal demand for husbands and note these are reciprocal—they go together. “Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.” Now the word ‘love’ here is that strong Greek word the New Testament takes over to speak of the self-forgetful self-giving of Christ on the cross—agape. Paul has in mind our Lord’s love when he speaks of love in this way. This reciprocal command for the husband to love is also a demand to give yourself to and for your wife.

One of the things that strikes me as I read these instructions for wives and husbands, both here in Colossians and in Ephesians, is that Paul underlines the husband’s need to love. He doesn’t say the same to wives. I wonder about his emphasis—was it that husbands needed this corrective because of a disregard for their wives that Paul saw? In Ephesians he spells out what this love looks like so there is no ambiguity—‘just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ I can hear some husbands in the Colossian congregation muttering a big ‘ouch’ because this admonition struck close to home.

I fully understand that our current culture does not share the view of marriage outlined in the Bible. Neither did the culture in which these Christians in Colossae found themselves swimming. Paul gives this word as a directive for living out marriage commitments as a Christian. Just before he gave these directives with regard to household life he had written, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Here he writes something of what that means for wives and husbands. In other words, to give ourselves as wives and husbands for each other in this way is God honoring; it witnesses to the love of Christ and his church. Pray for wisdom as you endeavor to follow our Lord working out this self-giving for the other in the practicalities of day to day life.

2. Children, obey your parents in everything. Again, in the scriptures obedience is a good word. To obey God is life. That early church hymn found in Paul’s Philippian letter extols Jesus because “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8) Jesus’ obedience is our salvation. In the household code in Ephesians Paul adds to this requirement for children to obey parents, ‘Honour your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise. Parents, to teach your children this obedience is to teach Godliness.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. The word translated ‘fathers’ here is sometimes used to mean ‘parents.’ And since the previous admonition was for children to obey parents then likely we should understand ‘parents’, though perhaps fathers are singled out to pay attention to this in particular. Announcing to your children that God’s command is to obey you is not the best way to go about leading them in the way they should go. It would seem that Paul’s concern was that parents—or fathers in particular—were deriding their children’s efforts such that they never felt they could measure up and so gave up trying. In our world devoted to self-esteem we have gone in the other direction assuring children that any effort at all is marvelous. After a while a child begins to think the world revolves around them and not God. Surely some balance between these two extremes honours our Lord.

Notice that Paul says nothing to parents about them expecting obedience from their children. Rather he addresses their role in encouraging their children’s obedience to God.

3. The question has been raised as to why the Apostle Paul does not call for the end of the institution of slavery—why he does not say, “Masters, free your slaves.” Instead he reminds both slave and master that, as Christians, they serve the Lord

Christ and are answerable to Him for their work and behaviour in this relationship in which they find themselves. The slave owners hear Paul's not so subtle directive—for the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, there is no partiality (with God). Further, I think Paul says enough to masters to plant the seeds to free slaves. In the letter to Philemon that came with the Colossian letter, Paul, in essence, says enough to Philemon that the logical outworking would be to free his runaway slave Onesimus.

It appears that Paul chooses to plant seeds to undermine and bring an end to slavery rather than a frontal assault on the institution. He tells slaves to do their work as slaves of Christ—in essence as free people answerable to a higher authority. He tells masters that they have one true master and that their slaves have the same master...you stand on equal ground before the same Lord Christ.

I note with you that when a person becomes a believer they are set right with God because of what Jesus has done to redeem us from sin. Ever so the arrears of sin aren't completely erased—why not? We are released from captivity to sin but still must battle sin. It has something to do with God's saving purpose and regard for the life he has given. I want to make clear that I applaud the end of slavery wherever that has happened—so would the Apostle Paul. Those who seek to end human trafficking in our world need to be supported.

4. Finally a note or two on this household code in light of the larger context of what the gospel declares. As we have noted, the Apostle predicates what he says on the Lordship of Christ. Paul, reflecting on the believer's service of our Lord, probes aspects of what that looks like in these first-century household relationships. And we remember the gospel declaration that to serve Him is perfect freedom.

The gospel informs us that each human being is created in the image of God and therefore has inherent dignity. Jesus treats people this way. Even those who oppose him, he does not harm. Additionally the gospel informs us that each person is someone for whom our Lord gave up his life to redeem. These truths inform how we are to treat one another as humans. Surely these truths should inform us in how we treat the most intimate relationship in life—that of husband and wife. They should also shape family relationships as Paul makes clear in talking to children and parents. It should also inform work/employment relationships—both those we work for and those who work for us.

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