

Right Relationships

Colossians 3:12-4:1

Previously in Colossians we looked at how we should be a people with our minds fixed on heaven. What we've said about this letter has matched our morning sermons well even though that wasn't by design. Last time we saw behaviours that we needed to take off and what we needed to put on as we sought to live lives with our destination fixed on heaven. We talked in terms of clothes - we looked at what we need to take off and what we needed to put on

We also saw that Paul was not merely talking in personal terms but was presenting what he said to the church. Therefore as we read these verses in chapter 3 they are being addressed to the church because our effectiveness as a church is about our relationships. As a church we need to have our minds fixed on our destination – we are an outpost of heaven.

And as we read these verses again this evening we were reminded again of the way that we need to build each other up and encourage one another in Christ. A key verse for what we looked at last time and for these verses is 17 *Everything you do or say, then, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father.*

But now Paul takes it to another set of relationships, family and work. At first I wondered what they were doing here. After all this is a passage about relationships in church, so why break off to talk about marriage, children and masters? However, apart from giving advice about marriage, children and work relationships, they all give us a perspective on our relationship with Christ as His church.

So when we look at some of the basic human relationships, we see that they are a reflection of the relationship we have come into with God in Christ. I'm going to look at marriage tonight and at the other two next time. As this occurs in a passage about relationships in the church, we'll see that each of these pictures tells us something about the church as it does about the relationship in question.

Wives/Husbands

18 *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* 19 *Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*

Ephesians 5:21 Submit yourselves to one another because of your reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church; and Christ is himself the Saviour of the church, his body. 24 And so wives must submit themselves completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ. 25 Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. 26 He did this to dedicate the church to God by his word, after making it clean by washing it in water, 27 in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty--pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection. 28 Men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself. 29 (None of us ever hate our own bodies. Instead, we feed them, and take care of them, just as Christ does the church; 30 for we are members of his body.) 31 As the scripture says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one." 32 There is a deep secret truth revealed in this scripture, which I understand as applying to

Christ and the church. 33 But it also applies to you: every husband must love his wife as himself, and every wife must respect her husband.

The Christian view of marriage. It's quite different to the world's view of marriage. On the one hand marriage has gone out of fashion with many. Now they just live together – they see marriage as an outmoded institution. On the other hand there is a vociferous minority who advocate same-sex marriage. Do these views of marriage have any validity?

You won't be surprised to learn that as far as I'm concerned the Bible teaches only one thing on family life – and that it's based entirely on the marriage of a man to woman – and that is a serious commitment. It is like that because it is the created order of God and it exists to express the relationship between Christ and the church. How the church and Christ works is how marriage works – or should. Get it right as far as church is concerned and we get a healthy church. Get it right in marriage relationships and we get healthy marriages.

As you can see from these passages men and women have quite different roles in the marital relationship. Why? Because like it or not men and women are different – you can't miss it actually. Physiologically we are different. Built for different roles. God created us as part of the animal kingdom and at most basic that's how we function – male and female he made them. In pre-industrial societies, the man had a provider role and the woman a nurture role, although within that much was shared.

It's not a case of superior/inferior. What makes marriage work is an acceptance of being different and realising that the marriage partnership causes the whole to become greater than the sum of its parts.

What also makes marriage work is seeing how the relationship between Christ and the church actually works out in practice. The relationship between Christ and the church is a model for good marriage.

24 And so wives must submit themselves completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ.

Christ and the church is definitely not the model in many of the world's societies, particularly traditional ones. However even in societies with a Christian influence, the idea of submission and authority has been abused such as the stereotypical Victorian family where the man ruled with a rod of iron and the woman knew her place. This was that societies definition of what submissive was all about. Muslim society is characterised by bullying men and repressed women.

But is this really a picture of Christ and the church? I'd say definitely not. If we look at Christ – the bridegroom – what's He like in the way he treats us – the bride?

As church we submit ourselves to our bridegroom – Christ. We submit to Him because He has authority over us. What does that mean? We do as He wishes. Why? Because we know He's there to ensure our welfare, to protect and make sure that in the things in our spiritual life we have everything necessary to thrive and be happy. His authority over us means he has a responsibility to us – He loves us and he proved that by dying for us. We know that by placing all our trust in Him we'll grow with Him. Authority means responsibility. I'm sure that none of us would think that unreasonable.

So a wife submits to the husband – it's God's order – a picture of Christ and the church. If you think that's tough, look at what the man's got to do. *Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. 26 He did this to dedicate the church to God by his word, after making it clean by washing it in water, 27 in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty--pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection. 28 Men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself.*

All women have to do is “submit” and “respect”. Not so for the man. Husbands love your wives. The love isn't sloppy sentimental slosh but agape. Husbands care for your wives so much so that if it came to, your life would be forfeit for theirs. Because that is what Jesus did. Put your wife and her needs before your own. That's a serious responsibility and completely torpedoes any notion of dominant bullying manhood. If you put it like that the woman gets a good deal.

What a great picture of manhood for the 21st century. One of the biggest problems in Britain now for under 30 men is the tendency to father children and then take no responsibility for them. We are growing a generation of saps. It's because it's all the wrong way around. Young people have sexual relationships, have children either by accident or design, live together to see if their relationships might work, get married if they can be bothered or afford it, and if it doesn't work then divorce is quite easy these days. And we wonder why we are creating a land of man deserts and dysfunctional families. All the experts say “a child needs a mother and a father”. Then they say “why are Christians so against same-sex marriage?” Actually the passage answers that – because marriage is a partnership of difference. One is materially, radically different from the other – like male and female, like Christ and the Church.

How does God work His purposes out on Earth? He has chosen to use a body of human beings, headed by Christ. The relationship is a marriage – a covenant relationship. He's done it because it is the most effective way. He could do it other ways, but in the act of the union between Christ and the church, we grow and thrive through it as His family. If it was just us trying to do it in our own power, then it wouldn't work.

That's the picture of marriage. What makes it work is two different kinds of human beings are put together to create family. Therefore we promote marriage between a man and woman (no other form exists) as the basis of family life. It's what works best – anything else is short of what God planned. Yes, one parent families, step-families and the rest can work, but even non-Christian sociologists and child development people see the most effective norm as an effective mum, dad and children.

That's why we promote marriage as God's people. It's the best way for developing human family relationships. It's God's way. More significantly, marriage is modelled by the church and the church is also modelled by marriage. If we want to understand how church works, look at marriage. If we want to know how marriage works, look at church – or at least the perfect model for each we are given in scripture.

And that's the thing – so often both marriage and church is dysfunctional. That's not Christ's fault. It's ours. Let's determine again to seek God's help in bringing His word into reality in our church and in our marriages.

Right Relationships 2

Colossians 3:12-4:1

Previously in Colossians we looked at how we should be a people with our minds fixed on heaven. We talked in terms of clothes - we looked at what we need to take off and what we needed to put on. We also saw that Paul was not merely talking in personal terms but was presenting what he said to the church. Therefore as we read these verses in chapter 3 they are being addressed to the church because our effectiveness as a church is about our relationships. As a church we need to have our minds fixed on our destination – we are an outpost of heaven.

And as we read these verses again this evening we were reminded again of the way that we need to build each other up and encourage one another in Christ. A key verse for what we looked at last time and for these verses is 17 *Everything you do or say, then, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father.*

Last time we saw how the foundations of strong relationships in church should also be the foundations of good family relationships and vice versa. Paul encouraged the church to encourage one another and build one another up: 15 *The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body.*

Our relationship with Christ is at the heart of good relationships between ourselves in our own day to day lives as well as in the church. Paul illustrates this in three ways by looking at marriage, children and domestic service, all elements of a first century household.

Last time, we saw the way which we promote marriage as God's people as it's the best way for developing family relationships. It's God's way. Marriage is modelled on the relationship between Christ and the church and the church is modelled by marriage. If we want to understand how church works well, look at a good marriage. If we want to know how marriage works, look at good church and its relationship with Christ. For that matter, dysfunctional churches and dysfunctional marriages have roughly the same causes too! And that's the thing – so often both marriage and church is dysfunctional. That's not Christ's fault. It's ours. If our relationship with Him is wrong, then church is wrong.

But as we read onwards in this passage we realise that the principle of the relationship to Christ and the church is also reflected in other familial and household relationships.

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

As last time, this is a shorter version of what is written in Ephesians 6: 1 *Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents, for this is the right thing to do. 2 "Respect your father and mother" is the first commandment that has a promise added: 3 "so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land." 4 Parents, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry. Instead, raise them with Christian discipline and instruction.*

Honour your father and mother ; It's part of the 10 commandments. Good family relationships are fostered when children understand their relationship to their parents. And as Paul says in Ephesians 6:3 it was a command with a promise *"so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land."* There was a practical reason. The

ability to farm land at this time depended on there being enough people and the extended family was an important part of this. Without social cohesion, people would not be able to run farms and grow crops – in fact there was a system of redemption in place for ensuring land stayed with families when men died from disease or war.

So to make the system work, there needed to be a strong relationship between children and parents – and honouring parents was a fundamental part of that. In fact in most non-western societies, a statement like this would be taken as read, not questioned, not commented on. That's expected. Anything else is regarded as a no-no. The concept of the child with attitude and the rebellious teenager does not exist. I often taught children from Chinese backgrounds and it is remarkable how those young people were driven by family honour and family expectations and we are not talking about pushy parents here. These students had a real desire to see their family honoured by working to their best. Of course there were the customary exceptions!

But this passage is about Christ and the church. Paul knew there is such a thing as the bad parent too – they exist in every society. Good family relationships are two-way.

21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

4 Parents, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry. Instead, raise them with Christian discipline and instruction.

I've heard plenty of talk over the years about how awful children are these days – full of attitude, disobedient, undisciplined and all the rest. But where did they get it all from? It's a challenge to all Christian parents. Our upbringing of children should be with Christian discipline and instruction.

On who do we base Christian parenthood? On our Father in heaven and in Christ – a Father/Son relationship. He was the one who loved us and gave Himself for us. The mark of how far God as a parent was prepared to go in order that he may establish His parenthood in us is expressed in the bread and wine we see before us this evening.

I think most of us will understand God's parenthood. I know As a parent what I go through for the benefit of my children. And what do I expect in turn? Respect, obedience. Why obedience? Just to be domineering? Look at the parenthood of God. He wants our obedience because it is what makes us grow and thrive. He really does know best.

That said it's a challenge to us to ask ourselves the question about how reasonable we are acting as a parent. Poor relationships in families can be due to unreasonable parents. We all know of situations like that. Scenarios. Quite a challenge for us isn't it.

And the challenge of child-parent is not confined to smaller children. Relationships between adult children and parents can be just as fraught. What does honour really mean? Scenarios.

Let's go on to the final household relationship.

22 Slaves, obey your human masters in all things, not only when they are watching you because you want to gain their approval; but do it with a sincere heart because of your reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for people. 24 Remember that the Lord will give you as

a reward what he has kept for his people. For Christ is the real Master you serve. 25 And all wrongdoers will be repaid for the wrong things they do, because God judges everyone by the same standard. 4:1 Masters, be fair and just in the way you treat your slaves. Remember that you too have a Master in heaven.

Now you may wonder why I'm talking about this in terms of households. It was very common in richer families for there to be household slaves. These were rarely forced labourers such as captured enemies or unwillingly subjugated races. Most slaves were bond-servants – part of a feudal system. They were either bonded permanently or temporarily to owning families. It was not necessarily a harsh regime although unacceptable by modern standards. The attitude to it was rather like the idea of domestic service or tied agricultural workers that existed in this country which existed up until not so long ago. In fact domestic service and tied workers in this country developed out of our feudal system.

This kind of feudalism could be either benign or harsh. Paul encourages those who were slaves and those who were masters to act according to their relationship with Christ. For slaves this was particularly challenging if their master wasn't particularly sympathetic:

Slaves, obey your human masters in all things, not only when they are watching you because you want to gain their approval; but do it with a sincere heart because of your reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for people.

In other words, do as you do unto the Lord as though you were working for Him. Most slaves only did what they had to in order to keep them happy rather than to achieve excellence. But the Lord saw what they did and they were to do everything according to Him – after all He sees everything and he's there all the time!

As I've said, Paul was addressing household and agricultural slaves in churches. They've long gone but we still use this passage to explore the relationship that workers have to employers. That seems to me to be perfectly valid and encourages God's people to excellence in whatever they do because if we do what we do unto the Lord, it will always be of the highest quality however rubbish our employer is!

It actually comes with a warning too, so that we take what Paul says seriously:

Remember that the Lord will give you as a reward what he has kept for his people. For Christ is the real Master you serve. 25 And all wrongdoers will be repaid for the wrong things they do, because God judges everyone by the same standard.

This isn't something that's just an idea. Sometimes we excuse poor behaviour in ourselves because as I said in my previous morning sermon, we think that somehow God isn't going to do much about it. But these verses show that we really do have a responsibility towards God. He sees everything and we ARE accountable to Him of all our actions.

Let's look at it the other way around: *4:1 Masters, be fair and just in the way you treat your slaves. Remember that you too have a Master in heaven.*

Again we have a God who is our model. We have thought a lot about justice and compassion in the past month or so. That's no surprise really as we have a God who is just and compassionate. As our Master He is our model. This again crosses from the

Roman household to the modern employer. We've all come across as many bad employers as we have bad employees. Employers who rip people off who work for them. That said, it was Christian employers in the nineteenth century which led the way in quality employment conditions for their workers.

A Christian employer is one who pays the right wage for the right job, who is fair and equitable with workers, who is compassionate to employees in difficulty. Interestingly, good employers are ones which have the best productivity because they treat staff as though they were part of a family. Where's that modelled from: some of the greatest Christian philanthropists of the nineteenth century onwards. In fact, the best employers I ever had were the ones that were decent to employees, because no-one does a really good job for a beastly employer who treats and pays unfairly. "If you pay peanuts you get monkeys."

So what does this all teach us? That in our relationships, whether they be family or employment, we do things as unto the Lord. Our earthly relationships would reflect the heavenly.

Of course we know all this, but if we should be an outpost of heaven on earth, our lives should be such the people outside the church should see us as a church, our families and our attitude to working life as being something that is great and should be aspired to. Too often that falls short doesn't it? I know that because people don't talk about our faith as something that should be aspired to. What a difference there would be if that was the case.

That I believe is the challenge of our work and witness of God's people in this age if we are really going to make a difference to our society in our generation. At the core is obedience: to live and act as unto the Lord. That's the challenge!

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