

Colossians 3:18-22

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The opportunity to steward one's character, to live according to the things above rather than the things below, is available to everyone in every circumstance and setting.

It is important in this passage to remind ourselves that the passages and verses we find in our modern Bibles are relatively modern inventions. Paul is writing this letter to the Colossians as one continuous document. This passage connects both with the previous passage and the one to follow. It is not a random sidebar.

Paul has just described to the Colossian believers that, more than any specific right action, the important thing is to have the correct mindset and a heart posture that is in alignment with Christ. This alignment leads to right actions.

The following, then, is not necessarily a social commentary on how things ought to be. It is, rather, an encouragement to serve the Lord in the midst of the way things are—this does not negate the opportunity to make things better (i.e. fight for the abolition of slavery), but at the same time does not require circumstantial justice to be present in order to execute proper stewardship within that situation.

Paul starts with an instruction to women, which is a notable place to begin. He tells *wives to be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord*. To be *subject* basically means to serve. To lead through serving. To give and empower. In the time this was written, there was no question to the husband's role as the "head" or the "lead" of the family (which is what makes it interesting that Paul starts with instruction for wives rather than husbands). However, this is a pattern in scripture, to speak first to women.

The wife's role in a marriage is to serve her husband in a manner that is *fitting in the Lord*. Other scriptures describe what *is fitting in the Lord* for wives with respect to their husbands. The Apostle Peter admonishes wives to use a godly example of great character to help their husbands obey the Word. He also encourages them to avoid using corrective words (1 Peter 3:1-4). This is likely because males are relationally shy, and corrective words from their wife feels like rejection.

Peter indicates that when women use words of affirmation and respect, along with their godly example, men are likely to follow their lead (1 Peter 3:1-6). This is a power to be stewarded "in the name of the Lord," and for the benefit of their husband. In doing so, they are serving God.

This means that the wife's service to her husband stands apart from social custom. It is something she has the amazing opportunity to do in a manner that is "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). It is right or proper (sometimes the word for fitting can be translated "convenient") for wives to serve their husbands *as is fitting in the Lord*. It is an act of love and an act of service to God. Paul encourages wives to serve their husbands in love, which is

something over which they have complete control. No one can stop a wife from loving her husband as unto the Lord. Next, Paul turns to husbands.

Paul then tells the *husbands to love your wives and do not be embittered against them*. The word for *love* here translates the Greek word “agapeo.” This is the kind of love God had for us when He sent Jesus to die in our place. To *love* (“agape”) means the husband is to serve the best interest of the wife. To lead through serving. To give and empower. This is, again, apart from social norms. The husband’s love for the wife is to be done as unto the Lord, and is a service to Him.

Other passages describe how men are to love their wives. Peter tells men to understand their wives and invite their wives to participate fully with them as a partner in life (1 Peter 3:7). Woman was created in the image of God as a helper (Genesis 2:18). The Hebrew word translated “helper” in Genesis 2:18 is primarily used in the Old Testament to describe God, who is our Helper. One way for husbands to love their wives is to invite them to serve in their role as a helper.

Men and women are different and the manifestations of service/love in a marriage is different for each gender. But in the end, it is two halves of the same agenda—loving and serving one another. When husband and wife serve one another, they exhibit the image of God. God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4). God’s design for marriage is for two to become one (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31).

After the conjunction *and* in the phrase *Husbands, love your wives*, Paul tells *husbands not to be embittered against* their wives. The Greek word for *embittered* is “pikraino.” It means to “make bitter” or to “be bitter.” The word is used only four times in Scripture. All of the other three occurrences are in The Book of Revelation. To make something bitter is to take the sweetness out of it, to pollute or pervert its makeup. All three Revelation references talk about something good being turned *bitter*.

Here in Colossians, the *husband* is the agent that makes things *bitter*. The word translated *against* here is a preposition. It is most often translated as “to” or, quite literally, “to the advantage of.” So, Paul’s instruction is to not be a force that poisons the goodness of one’s wife. Don’t exploit your wife. Don’t turn her goodness sour and stifle her capacity. This is the opposite of love. It is to squelch the value of something. *Husbands* ought to *love* in such a way that the light within their wives shines rather than fades.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts husbands to use words to help their wives grow and prosper, to become all they can be, just as Christ uses words to sanctify His bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25-27). When husbands love their wives in this manner, they are loving themselves as well, since in marriage two have become one (Ephesians 5:28).

Paul then moves to instructions for the offspring. *Children*, he writes, *be obedient to your parents in all things*. This instruction is consistent in that Paul recognizes the freedom God has given each person to make choices for themselves. The word for *be obedient* is the Greek word “hypakouo,” which literally means “listen attentively”—and by implication, internalize and then

enact what you have heard. So, *children* ought to pay attention to the example, instruction, and guidance of their *parents*. It is the responsibility of *parents* to teach, *and* for children to *be obedient*. Parents cannot make choices for their children, and children cannot make choices for their parents.

Paul says for *children* to be obedient to their parents *in all things*. The phrase *all things* is a translation of a single Greek word that means “all.” It is the same root word in 3:17 translated “all” and “whatever” in the phrase “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Just as there are no caveats in the command to do everything, whether word or deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus, there is no caveat for children with respect to their parents.

Interestingly, Paul’s rationale for children’s obedience is not “because they are your parents.” Rather it is *for this is well-pleasing to the Lord*. The motivation for children to submit to imperfect parents is to please a perfect God. Additionally, in submitting to their parents in word and deed, children are learning to submit to God in word and deed when they mature into adults.

For their part, *fathers* are instructed to not *exasperate* their *children* so that they will not *lose heart*. It is interesting that *children* are instructed to obey their *parents* (the Greek word “goneus,” which includes both father and mother) in verse 20, but here it is only fathers (singular, “pater” in Greek) that are given this warning.

To *exasperate*, as it is used here, is to stir up or rile. Something like exhausting them. The result of doing this is that the young person will *lose heart*. Literally, this is the Greek word “athymeo”—a combination of “a,” which is a negative participle, and “thymos.” which means “passion.” When we *exasperate* young people, they tend to *lose heart*. Perhaps this is especially true of the influence of *fathers*, which is why Paul singles them out. By implication (since all of this is what not to do), *fathers* ought to be engaged, while being patient and encouraging.

Paul remains consistent in recognizing the sovereignty God has granted each person to steward their own choices. *Fathers* are not responsible for their children’s obedience. Rather they are responsible to be good *fathers*.

Lastly, Paul speaks to *slaves* to encourage them to live faithfully. He begins with: *in all things, obey those who are your masters on earth*. The beginnings of this are exactly the same as in the instruction to children—*in all things* includes “kata” or “according to,” likely a recognition of the way things are; the word for *obey* is “hypakouo,” which means “listen to.”

Those who are your masters on earth is an interesting phrase. The word for *masters* is the same word for Lord that ends this verse (in reference to God). And the word for *earth* is not about the globe we live on; it is the Greek word “sarx,” which means “flesh” or “the body.” A *slave* has a master of his body but the true Lord God is master of all souls.

Paul tells slaves to *obey*...*not with external service as those who merely please men*. *External service* here means something akin to when we say someone is “just going through the motions.” And *to please men* means to do something for the approval of other people, as an attempt to curry favor among humans. The picture is of someone doing the minimum, only being faithful in

things that are measured or supervised. Rather, God wants them to serve their masters from the heart, because to do so is to serve God.

Both words “master” and “flesh” only appear together twice in Scripture, here and in a similar admonition for slaves to obey their “masters in the flesh” or *masters on earth* in Ephesians 6. The idea is that the proper stewarding of oneself is not about meeting the obligations or seeking the superficial benefits of the worldly system one finds oneself in. It is about setting one’s mind to the one thing no worldly circumstance can take away: the choice of how to steward our lives as unto the Lord.

In contrast to working for human standards, Paul tells the slave to steward *with sincerity of heart*. In other words: do things not by the measure of external standards of men, but according to who you are as a person. Not according to circumstance, but according to character.

No one can block any human from choosing to have good character. Accordingly, there is an underling message here that in God’s economy, every single person can achieve greatness, by pleasing God in “whatever they do, in word or deed.” It is a matter of stewarding well whatever one has. There is no hint in any of these admonitions that God requires anyone to acquire a particular station in life or succeed in creating any particular circumstance. Rather, we are all asked to be good stewards of whatever station we have in life, in whatever we choose to do or say.

And Paul concludes with the phrase, *fearing the Lord*.

The fear of the Lord is a prevalent idea in Scripture. In Proverbs 1 and Psalm 111, it is described as “the beginning of wisdom.” In Proverbs 14, it is described as “a fountain of life” (for more examples, see Deuteronomy 10:12, Ecclesiastes 12:13, Luke 1:50). The word *fear* in these contexts certainly means to have a healthy concern. After all, if Christ truly is the Lord, to disappoint Him is a scary prospect. The word also carries the connotation of reverence, of awe. When we *fear* something, we acknowledge its superior power. There really is no place for this except in the Lord.

Part of the reality being expressed here is that humans all operate out of fear. The big question is how we prioritize our fears. We can see this in Exodus 20. The people asked that God not speak to them from Mount Sinai, but rather speak through Moses, because they feared physical death. God responds to them and asks them to prioritize a different fear:

“Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.’”
(Exodus 20:20)

Here in Exodus, Moses exhorts the people to displace their natural fear of death with a fear of sinning. To sin is to displease God, and to choose a consequence of death and self-destruction. Rather than fear men, which leads us to choose worldly priorities, we have the opportunity to choose to have a greater fear of gaining God’s disapproval for being poor stewards of the

opportunities He has provided us. Opportunities to learn, benefit, and grow into the person He designed us to be, and thus reach our greatest fulfillment.

The reason Paul includes here an admonition to do all this with an attitude of *fearing the Lord* is because he wants to pull Colossian believers above their circumstances. He does not want them to fear, or obey, or be defined by their flesh, the world, or anything else. He wants them to set their minds and hearts on Christ, no matter what is happening around them. The instructions in this section are practical ways to orient oneself in this direction.

Biblical Text

¹⁸ Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. ²⁰ Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. ²² Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.