

Colossians 3:18–4:1

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.
Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children,
obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.
Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.
Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with
eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: and
whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;
knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance:
for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the
wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.*

Heavenly Calling, Earthly Duties — One Chapter

It is remarkable that the same chapter which opens with *seek those things which are above* closes with the most practical instructions about wives, husbands, children, fathers, and servants. These two things are not in tension. Those who seek heavenly things are not exempted from earthly relationships — they are the ones who can fulfil them rightly, because Christ is their life and His character is to flow out through them. The completeness that the believer has in Christ (2:10) is not an abstract position; it shows itself in the very specific and ordinary circumstances of the household. The instructions here are flanked on both sides by universals: *whatsoever ye do... in the name of the Lord Jesus* (3:17), and *whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord* (3:23). These relationships live under that banner.

Wives — As Is Fitting in the Lord

The instruction to wives in Colossians is much shorter than in Ephesians 5, and the tone is different. In Ephesians, the relationship of Christ and the church is brought in as the great picture to which marriage corresponds. Here it is simply: *as is fitting in the Lord* — seemly, suitable, consistent. To submit to one's own husband is fitting in the Lord — it suits the relationship, it is righteous in that it is consistent with it. And that word fitting addresses the question that is sometimes raised about whether submission to the husband conflicts with submission to the Lord. The verse answers it: the two are not in conflict. They are fitting to each other. Taking care of the one takes care of the other.

Husbands — Love and Not Bitter

In Ephesians, the standard for husbands is *as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it* — the highest standard conceivable. Here the exhortation is more immediately practical: *love your wives, and be not bitter against them*. Bitterness is a tendency in men that the word explicitly guards against. The word bitter describes something unpleasant, a distressing taste — and bitterness transferred from a husband to his wife will defile her too, and the children, and all who are about them. Hebrews 12:15 speaks of a root of bitterness that springs up to trouble and defile many. A husband who feeds on bitterness can become characterised by it so that it defines him — and that is what the word warns against.

The capacity to love the wife, as verse 17 implies, flows from the same source as all Christian love: *we love because he first loved us* (1 John 4:19). There is no natural capacity in man for the love that is described here. It requires the life of Christ flowing through the one who loves. The Boaz of the book of Ruth is the Old Testament picture of what a husband who loves looks like — and his character points ultimately to the Lord Jesus.

Children — Obedience That Ministers to the Lord's Pleasure

Children are called to obey their parents in all things, for this is *well pleasing in the Lord*. A child who obeys its parents is ministering to the pleasure of the Lord Jesus. That is a striking and lovely thought — that the smallest act of childly obedience in a household is noticed by the Lord and pleases Him. And the Word of God tells us in advance what is well pleasing to Him, so that there is no need to wait for some future judgment to know whether a given course is acceptable. The Scripture shows what He approves.

Fathers — Not Provoking to Discouragement

Because children are exhorted to obey in all things, the father has a corresponding responsibility to create an atmosphere in which such obedience is not made impossible. Darby: *do not vex your children to the end that they be not disheartened*. Undue rigour, favouring one child over another, making the household serve the father's convenience at the children's expense — these vex and discourage. A disheartened child has been undermined in the very place where the Lord calls for willing obedience. The responsibility rests with the father, as the head, to see that the household is governed in a way that promotes rather than hinders what the Lord desires.

Servants — As to the Lord, Not Unto Men

The instructions to servants close the household table with the widest statement of the principle. The servant is to obey in all things, not with eyeservice as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God. Whatever is done is to be done heartily — with the whole soul — as to the Lord and not unto men. The ground for this is remarkable: *ye serve the Lord Christ*. The servant who obeys his master is, in doing so, serving the Lord Christ. That transforms the whole character of the service. It is not merely employment; it is ministry to Christ

Himself.

And the obverse: *he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done, and there is no respect of persons*. God's moral government is even-handed. The master who wrongs the servant, the servant who wrongs the master — both will answer for it. The Lord Christ to whom the servant ministers is the same Lord who judges without respect of persons. And these instructions for the household, taken as a whole, are nothing less than the life of Christ flowing into subjection, love, obedience, care, and faithful service. They are a little bit of heaven on earth.

— *Study ends* —