

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Love in Daily Life

Colossians 3:18-21

Intro: We have now come to a list of duties that Paul ascribes for each member of the household. At first glance, this list seems to sit uncomfortably in the middle of this letter as there's no linking word at the beginning of it that forms some sort of grammatical connection to what was said before. Despite that, there is a very clear connection of idea. Paul has been describing love as an action word in the Christian life, beginning with a command to put off the actions and attitudes of the old life and to put on the virtues and godly characteristics of the new life, the crowning virtue of which is love. A self-sacrificing love creates an environment in which the peace of God can rule in believer's hearts, which then leads to personal thanksgiving and corporate worship, where the word of God is taught and exemplified by every member of the church through their participation in worship and their relationships with other.

Now here, in this list, Paul includes several concrete examples from daily life because he wants to stress the reality of worship and service in the real world and no world is as real as the world of family life. Other areas of life may be where we operate but family life is where we eat, sleep and exist. This emphasis on love in action in the daily lives of believers is in direct opposition to the empty philosophies of the false teachers who were teaching that true, spiritual experience could only be obtained through otherworldly pursuits of visions, ascetic rules or legalistic regulations. This list makes it very clear that Paul's call to the Colossian Christians to set their minds on things above (1-4) does not mean they can lightly brush aside their family obligations here below.

Of course, how domestic life should be ordered was not considered a trivial matter in the ancient world; household management was even a topic of discussion among philosophers of Paul's day. First Century Christians probably reflected on this topic because: 1) of the widespread interest in household management in Greco/Roman society and 2) because the household was so vital to the life of the church. Since Paul, in his letters, affirmed that all believers had become equals in Christ, they're now forced to deal with the question of how the various members of the family, in

various stations, were to relate to one another in the household in light of Christ's atoning work on their behalf. So, Paul continues his teaching on doing all things in the name of Jesus by focusing specifically on the family at home.

Before we look at Paul's first example, we need to ask 1 question. What sort of household is he thinking about here? Most NT scholars seem to agree that Paul's thinking of a Christian home; one in which at least nominal allegiance was paid to Christ by all of its members. While this view is widespread, it could be challenged for 2 reasons. 1) While household conversions certainly did occur (Philippi jailer, [Acts 16](#)), it's by no means certain that this was the norm in all cases. Is it realistic to assume that everyone in a household would become converts at the same time? In fact, in [1 Cor 7](#), Paul explicitly addresses the scenario of a Christian whose spouse is an unbeliever. Thus, it's more likely that many, if not most, Colossian Christians lived in homes whose members weren't all Christian.

2) The commands to husbands and wives here seem to be a far cry from the radical equality in marriage that Paul outlines in [1 Cor 7](#). Did Paul change his mind? Do different church situations call for different advice? Not likely! What is more likely is that Paul has in mind a household in which a Christian may find themselves living among non-Christian relatives, slaves or masters. This is both a more realistic picture of the likely situation of the Colossians and a better test case for Paul's argument. After all, it's 1 thing to see daily life as lived for Christ in a complete Christian environment and quite another to attempt the same thing in a pagan one.

The point here is that putting the virtues of the new life into practice begins at home. Christ's Lordship over the believer finds its definitive expression in the day-by-day, routine experiences of life. The peace of Christ ([15](#)) is not just to rule in the church, but in the home as well. The command to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus ([17](#)) applies to the everyday world of family life, where we are most likely to show our cloven hooves. Nothing is more difficult than living in a family where the virtues of tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, forgiveness and professions of sacrificial love are tested daily.

18- This instruction for the wife to submit to her husband actually fits what was the norm of what was regarded as becoming conduct for a wife in

Paul's culture, whether it was Greek, Roman or Jewish. In the ancient world, women were expected to be under the authority of a man. Unmarried women would be subject to their fathers and wives to their husbands. Women could not, under Roman law, own property or run businesses. Of course, in practice, there were ways around these restrictions as there were many examples of independent, business owning women. But, technically, there was almost always the name of a male relative on the necessary bank and business documents. Despite those rare exceptions, the popular expectation, and probably for most women in reality, life revolved around the home, with the husband as the household's authority figure.

Here, Paul doesn't argue against this cultural assumption. The change in women's status in our age and modern sensibilities today lead many to wish that he had. But, the command for wives to submit was not inappropriate in his context, for several reasons. 1) It reflects the legal state of affairs. The husband (*paterfamilias* – head of household) was the only fully legal person in the family and had power over all property and almost absolute authority over every member of it. They were all obligated to obey him, and Paul doesn't challenge the existing legal order.

2) The Gk verb translated submit does in no way imply any kind of innate inferiority but is used to reflect a modest, cooperative demeanor that puts others first. It was something expected of all Christians regardless of their societal position or gender (Mk 10; I Cor 16; Eph 5; Phil 2; I Ptr 5). It's essentially a word borrowed from the military. It literally means "to be under in rank." It speaks of the way that an army is organized among levels of rank, with generals, colonels, majors, captains, sergeants and privates. There are levels of rank and one is obligated to respect those in higher rank. Clearly, it is entirely possible for a private to be smarter, more talented and be a better person than a general. But the private is still under rank to the general. He isn't submitted to the general so much as to his person as he is to his rank as general. When military personnel salute, they salute the rank, not the person. In the same way, a wife doesn't submit to her husband because he deserves it. She submits because he is her husband.

The idea of submission doesn't have anything to do with someone being smarter or better or more talented. It has to do with God-appointed order. Just as in the military, rank only has to do with order and authority, not with value or ability. Thus, submission means you're part of a team. If the family is a team, the husband is the captain of the team and the wife has her role

in relation to the captain, and the children have their roles in relation to the parents. The form of the Gk verb shows that the submission is to be voluntary. The wife's submission is never to be forced on her by a demanding husband; it's the deference that a loving wife gladly shows, knowing that her home (just like every other human institution) must have a head. Anything with more than 1 head is a monster.

This command is also appropriate because 3) it is not one-sided; other commands are directed towards husbands. In fact, Paul has one command for wives and one for children but he directs no less than 3 commands to husbands.

Notice that Paul specifically says for wives to submit to their own husbands. This is important as it defines the sphere of a wife's submission – her own husband. The Bible never commands or even recommends a general submission of women unto men. It is commanded only in the spheres of the home and the church. God never commands that men have exclusive authority over women in the areas of politics, business, education or any other areas of social life.

Finally, Paul qualifies this submission further with the phrase, as is fitting to the Lord. For wives who are Christians, this becomes their proper sphere of Christian service, their offering to God; it is fitting in the Lord. As is fitting is a phrase that suggests a proper duty, whether your husband is a believer or not. That duty is not necessarily to just be subordinate but to recognize that where she is subordinate, her position can still be lived out for Christ and be offered to Him as an act of worship. This phrase defines the motive of a wife's submission: they submit to their husbands because it is part of your duty to the Lord and because it is an expression of your submission to the Lord. They submit simply because it is fitting in the Lord to do so. It honors God's Word and His order of authority. It is part of their Christian duty and discipleship.

19- Husbands, on the other hand, are presented with a much more demanding task. As we have seen, the husband in the ancient world had considerable power over his household and the way that power was used has now become an area in which Christ could be honored. Thus, the first command is for a husband to love his wife. While this may not seem too strange for us, it was to Paul's first readers. Most in the ancient world did

not expect marriage to be grounded in love. For most, marriage was simply an agreement (unequal as it was) between a man and a woman to produce legitimate heirs. Love was rarely the goal of marriage but if it happened, all the better; but it was not seen as a necessary motivation or requirement for marriage.

So, clearly, Paul's not writing to prop up the authority and rights of husbands, which were taken for granted anyway. Instead, Paul reminds Christian husbands of their obligations in the Lord. In a Christian marriage, the husband knows himself to be dearly loved by God (12) and is commanded to love his wife in the same way. He is not to seek to exercise his rights over his wife but to exercise his love over her, which means he never thinks in terms of rights and is always willing to forego them. If a wife is asked to submit, it is to the husband's love, not his tyranny.

But, what we should remember is that love in the NT context means more than having affection or romantic feelings for a wife. In fact, the word Paul uses is the Christian word for love, *agape*. Other words would normally have been expected, which convey the ideas of affection, friendship or sexual attraction. For Paul, though, the main type of love to be shown in the spousal relationship was the self-giving, undemanding love that mirrors the love of God. Such a love will not show itself in harsh treatment, but will look for the best interests and well-being of the beloved. In short, a husband is to care for his wife and always to seek her good.

A marriage may begin with normal, human, romantic love, but it must grow deeper into the spiritual *agape* love that comes only from God. In the parallel passage of Eph 5:25, Paul makes it clear that a husband must love his wife, even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. What does this mean? What did Jesus do for the church? He entered into our world and He died there! He gave His all for the church! He willingly died for us! The measure of a man's love for his wife is not seen only in gifts or words but in acts of sacrifice and concern for her happiness and welfare. Again, this is a command that can be put into practice regardless of the faith of the wife. It is a minimum requirement which is possible in any situation.

The 2nd command for husbands is related to the first but distinct from it in this sense. Some interpret the 2nd half of v19 as husbands are not to be harsh with their wives. If this is correct, then it rules out any overbearing,

tyrannical or intimidating behavior toward the wife. But, when Paul says do not be bitter towards them, he means do not become embittered or resentful towards them. Anyone can refrain from harsh treatment of others but Christians must do more. They must refrain from becoming flushed with anger or petulant when others treat them or respond to them in ways that irritate them. This command addresses the eventuality that the wife might not always be properly submissive, which in turn could likely trigger bitterness in the husband.

The implication is that maybe the wife has given the husband good reason to be bitter. Paul says, "That doesn't matter!" Any defiance or insolence on the wife's part doesn't cancel the husband's absolute obligation to love her. Sulking, fuming, grumbling, or worse, lashing out in verbal or physical violence, regardless of the provocation, real or imagined, is strictly forbidden. Agape loves without changing; loves without expecting or demanding repayment; loves the unlovable or unappealing; loves even when rejected. It's the very love God freely gives to us and as husbands, we're commanded to give no less to our wives, at all times and in every situation. Paul recognizes that if bitterness is allowed to taint the relationship between husband and wife, the whole household will suffer.

20- In ancient society, children were legally regarded as the father's property, and their status, theoretically, was little better than that as slaves. Thus, the command for children to obey their parents fits a universal societal expectation. However, it was unusual for Paul to address children directly, as though they were independent, responsible subjects. The command to obey...parents is a variation of the command to honor one's mother and father (**Ex 20:12**). This command assumes that parents will not demand anything unseemly from their children. It also takes for granted that the parents have the best interest of their children at heart.

But, the children's duty to obey their parents is transformed from simply a normal expectation into an obedience in the Lord. Paul emphasizes a child's opportunity to please the Lord through obedience, not just parents. They owe obedience above all to the Lord. The child's independent relationship with the Lord surpasses their relationship with their parents and Christ's own obedience to His Father in all things serves as the model. When a child respects his parents authority, they're respecting God's order of authority in other areas of life.

This idea of an order of authority and submission to that authority are so important to God that they are part of His very being. The First Person of the Trinity is called the Father; the Second Person of the Trinity is called the Son. Inherent in those titles is a relationship of authority and submission to authority. The Father exercises authority over the Son and the Son submits to the Father's authority, this is the very nature and being of God! Our failure to exercise biblical authority and our failure to recognize and submit to biblical authority is not just wrong and sad – it sins against the very nature of God. Just as Samuel told Saul in **1 Sam 15:23**, Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.

The proper, or acceptable duty of children in the Lord, or as Christians, is obedience to their parents. It's a minimum requirement, which could make even the most traditional, or dysfunctional childhood into an opportunity for Christian service to the Lord. Paul's command here in no way rules out the possibility of a much freer and more responsible role for children. The point is that even in the apparently limited sphere open to children, the possibility exists for a life that is offered as a living sacrifice to God. And, if they learn to do this willingly, at an early age, they will be better prepared to live for Christ wholeheartedly when they become adults and they'll have a better chance of foregoing the pitfalls and setbacks of a rebellious life; a life that will delay proper service to the Lord. Children may be powerless, but living out their roles as a free offering to the Lord, those roles can be transformed into an act of worship.

21- Unlike children, fathers had considerable power and so they have a much greater responsibility-to ensure that their children are not provoked. This word implies nagging, denigrating or even bullying. Children must not be belittled or made to feel worthless, or they could lose their sense of worth. Children who grow up with parents who provoke them will become discouraged. They won't feel the love and the support from their parents as they should and they'll come to believe that the whole world's against them because they feel their parents are against them. That may not be true but they don't know it's not true because, for most of their early life, parents are their world.

The implication here is that children are to be cherished, encouraged and loved. This reminds us how important it is to season our parenting with lots

of grace. The power of the Christian parent is to be directed towards bringing out the best in their children and building up their self-esteem in preparation for adult life. Maybe, to accomplish this goal, we should be as gracious, gentle, forgiving and longsuffering with our children as God is with us. Clearly, discipline is a necessary part of the parent-child relationship but Paul's greater concern here is that overly stern and heavy-handed parents might actually drive their children away from the faith.

These are the God-ordained roles for each member of the household. While they may, in one sense, reflect the societal norms of Paul's day, in another sense, they go far beyond those norms. They transform the everyday household roles into opportunities for each member to serve the Lord as they serve each other by submission, self-sacrificing loving and obedience. In each case, reflecting the very essence of the Holy Trinity in its relationship of love, submission and authority. These proper Christian roles may seem to be out of reach but it is the very power of Christ's resurrection that enables us to not only achieve these goals but to succeed in them for the glory of God.

Maybe you didn't have an example of a submissive mother, or a father who operated under a self-sacrificing love. Maybe you were discouraged as child by a parent or parents overbearing demeanor towards you. Maybe you weren't very obedient as a result and their failure has left a lasting negative impression on your adult life. If that is the case, just know that Jesus sees you for who you are, He loves you for who you are and He died to save you because of who you are, but also, so that He can make you into the person you were created to be – someone who looks a lot like Jesus. Jesus can heal all the past hurts in your life and He can take all the damage and transform it into a wonderful life that testifies of His grace, reveals His power and declares His glory! ☺