

In... For... And From...the Lord; Fearing and Pleasing... the Lord

Colossians 3:18-4:1

In an orchestra, every musician must submit themselves to the conductor. A good conductor wants each musician to excel in displaying their talents. The submission of the musicians to the conductor does not restrict them, but enables them, in coordination with other musicians, to produce music that surpasses what could be produced by any one of them individually.

The authority of the conductor is good.
And the submission of the musicians is good.
And the end result is a thing of beauty.

Jesus is Lord.
That is the most basic Christian confession.
Lord means master.
Jesus is Master.

As Master, Jesus owns you along with every other Christian.
He has purchased us with his own blood, and we belong to Him.

In addition to being Lord, Jesus is also our husband, and God is our Father.

Each of these names implies authority.
Fundamental to the Christian life is learning to bring our heart and life under submission to our Lord, our Father, our Husband.

We are united to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Husband. And through our union with Jesus Christ, we now know God as our Father.

The Christian hope of eternal life is meaningless without believing that all who abide there will be brought into perfect submission to Him.

Submission should never be viewed as a demeaning to the Christian. Submission, rightly understood, is beautiful. And submission to Christ, enables every Christian to blossom and flourish as a human being.

That is not what the world teaches us. The world teaches that all submission is inherently oppressive. Abuse of authority abounds in this sinful world. But neither authority nor submission is to blame. Otherwise, God would be wrong to establish Himself as our authority and require submission from us.

Christ is always our ultimate authority in all things.

Every human authority is subordinate to Christ as the ultimate authority.

Whenever you find yourself under some human authority. Your submission to the human authority goes only so far as they do not ask you to disobey your ultimate authority.

There is an implicit limiting of the scope of submission by this arrangement.

The Christian cannot do away with the human authority because they are now under Christ. But when the human authority calls the believer to disobey Christ, the believer is not bound to obey the human authority.

Acts 4:19-20 ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

If an authority gives a command that is morally wrong: such as murder.

If an authority calls you to deny your faith in Christ or to participate in ungodly worship practices.

If an authority forbids you to believe the truth or to engage in worship of the truth God.

Working out when it is appropriate to "not submit" is not always clear. And your own resistance to submission in general makes it even more hazy.

The general principle is that even when you refuse to submit, you ought to be making this choice out of a higher submission to Christ.

In our passage today, Paul focuses on three human relationships that involve authority:

1. Husbands and wives
2. Parents and children
3. Masters and slaves

Greco/Roman codes of the day often only addressed those in authority. That Paul addresses those under authority directly is distinct and, in itself, gives value to them.

Read Colossians 3:18 - 4:1

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

At its very core, to submit to someone is to place yourself under them.

Submission makes one vulnerable. Authorities are established by God for our good. But in a fallen world, submission can lead to being hurt and is often scary.

God might have established the husband/wife relationship such that there was no authority. But then marriage would not reflect Christ's relationship to the Church.

In marriage, "the wife 'puts herself under' her husband in recognizing and living out an 'order' established by God himself". (Moo, 300)

While we will see that the husband must always strive to exercise his authority with Christlike love towards his wife, he is never called to relinquish his position of authority. In other words, it is not biblical to establish a marriage in which the roles are reversed.

Scripture does not allow us to conceive of a marriage in which the wife is the head of the husband.

This being said, there are wrong and unhealthy ideas of submission in the Church. I am sympathetic to women who have been treated as inferior by their husbands. The husband and wife are equals. And while submission does involve the wife willingly placing herself under the authority of her husband, it does not imply that the husband should think of her as inferior to himself.

We would all do well to remember this one principle: the “one flesh” dynamic of the marriage relationship greatly affects the form of submission of a wife to her husband.

Ephesians 5:31 and the two shall become one flesh.”

There are many forms of submission that do not involve the “one flesh” dynamic.

1. The enemies of Christ will spend eternity in subjection to Him.

The submission of a wife to her husband will look very different than this.

2. David’s army submits to him as their commander.

This submission will look very different than a wife to her husband.

3. The creation is called to submit to Christ as he makes use of it.

This sort of submission can hardly be compared to the submission of a wife to her husband.

4. The submission of a child to their parents looks very different than the submission of a wife to her husband.

The husband would not order his wife to clean her room like he would his child.

5. Demons submit Jesus as Lord.

Demonic submission can hardly be compared to the submission of a bride.

6. Christians are called to submit to Secular Government Authorities.

Should a wife’s submitting to her husband look the same as a man submitting to the government authorities? I don’t think so.

When the form of submission in a husband/wife relationship begins to look like one of these other forms of submission, there is a problem. If submission is encouraged in some form that diminishes oneness, it is not the sort of submission that God desires.

A higher, and far more beautiful, picture of submission exists within the Trinity.

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one God in essence.

There is absolute equality in their being.

But in how they relate to one another in what theologians call “the Economic Trinity”, the Son remains under the authority of the Father.

Even after the Father has placed all things under the authority of the Son, the Son continues to submit himself to the Father.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

The relationship of the Trinity certainly affects the form of submission.
The Son placing Himself under the Father is unlike any other form of submission.

More to the point of the husband/wife submission:
The specific form of submission that God requires of the wife to her husband is the form of submission that will eternally exist between Christ and the Church.

ESV Ephesians 5:24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

"as" = "in the same way"

The submission of the wife to her husband should reflect the submission that the Church will enjoy in eternity to Christ.

The nature of that relationship helps us to create a more beautiful picture of submission.

How will the Church submit to Christ throughout all eternity?

1. She will rule with Him.

2 Timothy 2:11-12 ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;

Demons do not reign with Christ.
But the Bride most certainly does.
To reign with someone is more than simply taking orders from them.
The Church exercises wisdom and judgment in all things with Jesus Christ.

If this is true in the eternal husband/wife relationship, then it must be our goal for husbands and wives now.

2. Jesus considers His bride to be His intellectual equal.

That is a massive statement. But it is true.
Even though Jesus is fully divine, possessing an omniscience that as creatures we cannot possess, in order to enable the Church to fulfill her role as co-regent, God gives her the Holy Spirit.

John 14:26 ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

This verse is helpful in many ways, but in particular as it relates to the importance of the Bride knowing the truth that Jesus has known.

Jesus does not consider the Church to be inferior in such a way that she does not have the capacity to learn all truth.

Jesus wants his bride to know what He knows. He even imparts the Spirit to her to teach truth to the Church.

Husbands should not want to inhibit their wife's hunger for truth. They should encourage it. Husbands and wives will look at life from different perspectives, but men should respect and learn from the perspective of their wives.

3. Jesus and the Church are "one flesh".

This is not a mere physical union, but rather a union of the whole person. This union indicates that Christ acts in harmony with His bride.

The "one flesh" dynamic between a husband and wife transforms the concept of submission to a whole new level.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he explores this dynamic more fully than here in Colossians.

Ephesians 5:22-24 ²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

We see here that the dynamic of the Church submitting to Christ should be reflected in our human marriages.

"as the church submits to Christ, so also (in this same way) wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Women are not inferior to men. The husband/wife relationship is a "one flesh" relationship.

The husband is in the role of head in the relationship.

The woman is called to willingly submit to the headship of her husband.

There cannot be two independent heads. To suggest anything less is to pervert the Lordship of Christ over all things, including the Church.

But wives are not called to a form of submission that would in any way indicate inferiority.

Men and women must embrace this truth.

Jesus is not looking for an obedient dog as His eternal bride.

Jesus is not merely a commander issuing orders throughout all eternity to His bride.

Jesus is engaged in a "one-flesh" relationship with His bride.

And, it must be our ambition to reflect the sort of submission that will exist eternally, in our human marriages now.

Do I have the specifics as to how this will work itself out in every home? No, I do not.

But I know that submission must be understood in the context of the one-flesh relationship.

Women need to accept that submission is not demeaning of them.

Men need to encourage women in developing their whole person so that women do not think that submission is the only aspect of their relationship that matters.

In fact, I believe that both husband and wife should rethink this role in light of the overarching reality that they are both “in Christ” and both will one day together form the bride of Christ.

¹⁹ Husbands,
love your wives,
and
do not be harsh with them.

The command to husbands to love their wives was not typical in the Greek and Roman codes.

Paul is in uncharted waters when he commands husbands “to love their wives...”

Ephesians 5:25 as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,
Ephesians 5:28 as their own bodies.

Again, it is the eternal attitude and behavior of Christ towards the Church, His Bride, that determines the way in which a husband should act towards his wife now.

Here in Colossians, Paul must have had reports of men treating their wives harshly. So, he gives the direct command “do not be harsh with them.” Do not embitter them.

Husbands, you have an explicit command to “not exercise your authority in an oppressive manner”, but rather “with unceasing care and loving service.” (O’Brien 1982: 223)

Why would a husband be tempted to be harsh with his wife?
Because he believes that harshness is necessary to control his wife.
He has been given authority and power and so he uses that power to control his wife.
Only, this is never the way that Jesus treats the Church.
It is not the way that Jesus exercised His authority and power.

Matthew 20:25-28 ²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus entered into willing servitude to redeem his bride.
This is the sort of love that God calls us as husbands.

Husbands, what would you kids say?
Would they say that your leadership is so imbued with servitude that it often looks like mom is the boss and dad is the servant?

When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he did not abdicate his authority. But He did turn upside down their conception of how one in authority should behave.

Not only is it the duty of every husband to strive to emulate the love of Christ in the way that he loves his wife, those in authority in the Church have some responsibility to protect wives from the abuse of

harsh husbands. This is difficult for a whole number of reasons. But as a matter of principle, elders must try to protect those under their care who are oppressed.

Being in Christ, should transform the husband/wife relationship. The husband does not assert his authority. Instead, he willingly serves his wife. The needs and desires of his wife become more important than his own life, his own career, his own desires.

The driving desire for the husband must be to reflect Jesus Christ. Jesus told us that he is gentle and meek.

The driving desire for the wife must also be to reflect Christ. Through the power of the indwelling Spirit, she does not desire to supplant her husband. She desires him to become all that Christ saved him to be.

Submission and servant love are the ingredients of true oneness.

Lastly, both husband and wife must understand that the form of their relationship is temporal. In the eternal kingdom, both husband and wife experience the same inheritance together.

1 Peter 3:7 ⁷ Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Both men and women exist together as the Bride of Christ in eternity.

The next relationship is between children and their parents.

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

That Paul addresses kids at all gives value to them in the kingdom of God. Children should be taught obedience as a fundamental virtue of Christianity. Obedience is not something that must be endured for a few years as a child, but then once you leave the home is abandoned.

Children, your parents are temporary coaches given the task of helping you learn what it means to obey God eternally.

As you are learning obedience through the process of learning to obey your parents, you are doing what pleases God.

The point is not really obedience to parents at all. The point is learning to obey your Father in heaven.

If a parent were to train their children in such a way that obedience to them is the main point, then they are setting themselves up as a rival to God.

Have you told your kids that the day is coming when they will no longer have to obey you? You should. And you should also tell them that there will never be a day in which they no longer have to obey the Lord.

Kids, God is trying to help you with adult obedience. The more you fight against your parents, the harder it will be to obey God later in life. Every Christian is being brought to a place of obedience. You would do well to remember that your parents are God's gift to help you in this process.

This being said, kids and parents must accept that the form of submission will change as the child moves into adulthood. Everyone accepts that a 30 year old son or daughter does not obey in the same way that they did when they were 5. But the transition from childhood to adulthood can be difficult as the child begins to learn a more direct submission to the Lord, apart from their parents.

As with the husband/wife relationship, Paul sees parents abusing their authority. It is often the case that earthly parents are harder to please than the Lord. Paul feels it necessary to tell fathers, (parents) to not "provoke" their children. There are many ways to provoke. But my guess is that it relates to the harshness that men were displaying with their wives.

Being in a position of authority is challenging.
Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The father is the head of the household. As much as we love them, kids can be irritating. They can be childish. The father wants a child that is compliant. This is a good desire. But it is so easy to turn a good desire into being harsh and demanding of children. Dad becomes someone the kids fear, but not someone that is easy to please.

Kids, if you cannot ever please your father, take to heart that you can please your Heavenly Father. God, as your Father, is moving you towards perfection. But He does not demand perfection of you today. He is pleased at your sincere, yet imperfect, attempts at obedience.

And fathers, be sensitive to discouragement in your kids. The world beats them down all the time. Be their greatest encourager. Don't make every moment all about obedience. Enjoy your kids, even in their imperfect moments. Let them know that you are pleased with them.

There must be moments of discipline. But may they be moments and not the entirety of the relationship.

Jesus told parents, "Let the children come to me." He did not say this so that he could give them a spanking. He wanted to love and bless them.

Now, we come to the Master/Slave relationship.

"... ancient and modern slavery, in its various forms, has in common the basic fact that one human owns and has virtually ultimate control over another." (Moo, 308)

So, while there are some parallels between slavery and the employer/employee relationship, they are not the same thing.

Currently, our culture teaches, and many in the Church embrace, that slavery in every form is evil. This causes many people to reject the Bible as authoritative, especially when it comes to slavery.

Since the Bible does not anywhere outright reject slavery, and we know slavery must be condemned outright, then we must have progressed beyond the Bible.

I do not follow this line of reasoning.

Since the Bible does not condemn slavery, I believe it is my duty to try to understand why not. And even before I understand, I should not place myself in the position of judging God, or His Word.

It is my opinion that God does not condemn slavery, because it provides one important aspect of our relationship to Him. We are many other things to God. We are his children, we are his bride. But we cannot discount that we are also His slaves.

In fact, Paul loved to call himself a “doulos” of Christ. A slave of Christ.

Rather than condemning slavery in principle, the Bible works to rip out every evil associated with slavery. I do believe that humans enslaving other humans is a result of the Fall. I do not believe that men will enslave men in eternity. But neither will human marriage exist in glory.

Jesus will eternally be Lord over His people. And we will not mind calling Him Master.

If God were to condemn slavery as an institution, He would be condemning Himself.

This whole issue is extremely sensitive. I do not want to get into every nuance of the discussion today. I only want you to see the goodness of God in the text before us.

22 Slaves,
 obey in everything
 those who are your earthly masters,
 not by way of eye-service,
 as people-pleasers,
 but
 with sincerity of heart,
 fearing the Lord.

23 Whatever you do,
 work heartily,
 as for the Lord
 and
 not for men,

24 knowing that from the Lord
 you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

25 You are serving the Lord Christ.
 For the wrongdoer will be paid back
 for the wrong he has done,
 and
 there is no partiality.

I believe that Paul takes so much time on slaves because he has great empathy for the difficult situation in which they find themselves.

Under a good master, the slave should be free to follow his conscience.
But do to sin, most slaves had very little freedom to follow their own conscience.

Paul wants to give slaves a freedom that cannot be taken away from them.
Rather than being bound only to an earthly master, slaves are first and foremost bound to a heavenly Master.

Being united to Jesus as their Master frees the slave internally, spiritually.

Paul encourages the believing slaves to obey their masters more fervently than they did before they were Christians. Only now, in their hearts, he wants their obedience to be to Jesus.

The human master has become the means by which the slave obeys Christ.

Being in Christ is everything.

The slave's obedience to their earthly master improves.

But when it comes to motivation, the slave is now really obeying Jesus.

The earthly master may or may not give a reward. Often they did not. But the slave could now count on His heavenly Master rewarding him. The slave who belongs to Christ will enjoy the same eternal inheritance as the rest of the Body of Christ. In fact, there is no distinction between slave and free.

This reward is not primarily for this life. All the covenant promises of reward ultimately await the New Heavens and New Earth.

As the slave submits to his earthly Master, he is gaining eternal rewards.

As with children, our heavenly master is easier to please than our earthly masters.

And now, Jesus becomes the Defender of the slave who belongs to Him.

So, if a master mistreats a slave who is in Christ, then that slave can be assured that God will pay back the master for the wrong that he has committed.

In this way, the slave is no longer enslaved to his situation.

He has been freed from his former master, even before he is physically free.

And now he is bound to Jesus as his new Master.

^{ESV} Colossians 4:1

Masters,

treat your slaves justly and fairly,

knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Paul cuts out the evil of slavery, while sustaining the goodness of our heavenly Master.

Paul does not tell the master that owning a slave is evil in itself.

He does tell them that they must treat their slaves justly and fairly.

The slave does possess certain inalienable rights.

That means to treat them with respect and dignity and with kindness and generosity.

In every way that our heavenly Master treats us as His servants.

And Paul gives a warning that if the Master does not heed this warning, he will have to face the wrath of Jesus one day.

Now that we have gone through the passage, I want you to look back over the passage only seeing the importance of Christ and being “in Christ”.

Submission is done “in the Lord”.

Obedience to parents is done with an assurance that this pleases the Lord.

Slaves are to obey their earthly masters, fearing the Lord.

Slaves are to put their hope in an eternal inheritance, as a reward from Christ.

Whatever anyone does, ought to be done “as for the Lord”.

Can you see how being “in Christ” changes every circumstance in which you might find yourself?

God weaves the beauty of union with Christ into every current situation of your life, no matter how difficult the circumstance might be.

When we believe in Jesus as Savior, we are also believing in Him as Lord.

In fact, it is impossible to have Him as Savior without also taking Him as Lord.

We all continue to fall short of submitting to Jesus in all things. But we must not conceive of our relationship with Him apart from submission.

Are you living independent of Christ?

Cry out to Him for forgiveness.

Acknowledge His lordship over you.

Ask Him to help you learn to submit your will to His.

Trust that this is the great work of the Holy Spirit whom He has given to you.

Living out our submission to Christ has many facets.

He is our loving Master.

In Him we now know God as our loving Father.

And ultimately, we will reign with Him as our loving Husband.

May we all rejoice to say, “Jesus is Lord.”