

Colossians – Lesson 9

Conduct in the Christian Household

Read Colossians 3:18-4:1

1. Briefly describe the characteristics of the “*new self*” that Paul writes of in 3:12-17. What stands out to you as the most *significant* characteristic believers ought to express in this “*new self*”?

The “*new self*” is both the regenerated nature granted to his elect by the Spirit, which moves to eradicate all remaining sin in the flesh, and the outward reflection of that nature in various character attributes, such as compassion, humility, a ruling-sense of peace with God, reflexively forgiving others, and through teaching and admonition of the word of Christ, lives a life of great thankfulness to God. Although all of these characteristics are tremendously important to cultivate in the Christian life, the most significant to me is the importance of allowing the peace of Christ to “*rule*” in our hearts. Knowing that we are no longer under *any* condemnation in Christ, we are *freed* to live out a robust pursuit of *holiness*. In other words, a *radically* peaceful relationship to God that gives us a *deep* sense of value and purpose; *his* purpose in us to mold us into the image of Christ Jesus; his purpose from when he *originally* set his love upon us.

2. Scan this entire passage. Sketch an *outline* of the various individuals that are discussed by Paul. Do you see an *order* visible in this outline? Why does Paul give so *little* detail in these commands?

Paul speaks to: 1) wives and husbands; 2) children and parents (specifically, fathers); and 3) bondservants and masters. All of them are members of a first-century *Christan* household, in order by *status* beginning with the *primary* unit (wives and husbands), down to their children, then down to the servants (slaves). In each pair, Paul begins with commands to the *submissive* individual (wife, child, slave) and ends with imperatives for the *leader* (husband, father, master). It is likely that Paul gives *less* instruction here because he wrote more about this in Ephesians, a letter that likely was circulated to the Colossian church with this one.

3. (a) What does it mean for a wife to “*submit*” to her husband (3:18)? What does Paul *add* to this command in Ephesians 5:22-24?

To *submit* is to place oneself under the authority and direction of another; wives are *submissive* in recognizing that *God* has given to the *husband* the authority of the household, and the wife is to allow the husband to lead and direct it. Submission assumes a *willingness* to give over “control” in matters *both* large and small; the Christian wife is to recognize that God has given her husband the responsibility to lead the home, and she submits to his authority to do so. Paul notes in Ephesians 5 that this submission is similar to her submission “*to the Lord*”; just as submission to him is *necessary* under his role as *Lord*, such would be similar to her relationship to her husband, granted this authority by God. Just as *Christ* is the head of the church (his body), so the husband has been given the “headship” of his family (his body) *by Christ*.

(b) From the discussion of the “*new self*” in 3:12-17, how are Christian wives to be *fundamentally* different from other, unsaved women? How is this *contrary* to modern-day feminism?

Since the “*new self*” (as described above) recognizes the *radically new relationship* the believer has with God through Christ, the *Christian wife* takes this radical new relationship into *all other human relationships*, especially the one with her husband. Since utter submission to Christ is the *hallmark* of this new relationship, recognizing that Christ is Lord, the Christian wife “*puts on*” this new self in an attitude of humility, meekness, patience, etc. towards her husband, as the one who has been granted responsibility and headship over her. The *Christian wife* recognizes this as a *great good*, for it is fundamental to what it means to be in a relationship of peace with God; she strives to live out a *radically different relationship* with her husband, based on the state of being she (and he!) has with God in Christ. This is (obviously!) radically different from how the “world” views womanhood and being a wife. Feminism insists that women are to be *authoritative* in their own right, to serve in the role of “men” by taking leadership and authority *on their own*. This runs *utterly contrary* to a biblical view of *submission*: to be submissive as a wife is a *beautiful* image of submission to Christ, a view which feminism (believing to elevate women) actually despises. Implying that feminism is actually *contrary* to God’s will, for it attempts to *usurp* authority where it has not been granted *by God*.

4. (a) What does Paul mean that a husband is not to be “*harsh*” with his wife (3:19)?

Harsh, in this context, is probably to mean that the Christian husband is not treat his wife with a *dictatorial* attitude, demanding “his way” without any consideration for her feelings. To be harsh would be, in Paul’s estimation, in complete violation of the attributes of the “*new self*” as noted earlier: a *lack* of compassion, kindness, humility, patience, etc. It would be an attitude that would imply a *lack* of peace, bringing strife into the relationship by asserting *dominance* over his wife, rather than a loving leadership characterized by a strong sense of patience and love.

(b) According to Ephesians 5:25-33, how does Paul *expand* his understanding of husbands not being “*harsh*?” How does this view of husbands fit with the *primary indicative* of the book of Colossians?

Paul *expands* on his view of not being “*harsh*” by noting that husbands are to love their wives *self-sacrificially*; they are to treat their wives as Christ *himself* treats the church. They are to *serve* their wives by lovingly leading and directing all matters of the home, demonstrating a strong sense of humility in that leadership role. In other words, although husbands are to take the responsibility of leading well, they are to do so in a way that *ushers along* their wives (and children), helping them to *want to follow his lead*. This fits *nicely* into the primary indicative of the letter, namely, that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate: just as the Son of God was *willing* to submit himself to the Father in becoming a man, so a Christian husband must be *willing* to submit himself to Christ. Christ, in his obedience, carried out his mission with great authority (under the Father), loving his own, even to the point of death; the Christian husband, in his obedience, carries out his mission with great authority (under Christ), loving his own, even to the point of *sacrificing himself* for their well-being. The *incarnation* was an act of utter submission and obedience *in order to fulfill a mission*; the self-sacrifice of a Christian husband is similar.

(c) How are children to *relate* to their parents (3:20)? What do *you* believe Paul means in saying that fathers should not “*provoke*” their children (see also Ephesians 6:1-4)?

Children are commanded to obey their parents “*in everything*,” meaning that they are to *submit* to the leadership and authority of their parents *even when they may disagree* with them. This is both *spiritual* and *physical* obedience: physical, in doing/not doing what parents command, and *spiritual* in letting their parents raise them “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Fathers, on the other hand (like husbands!) should not “*provoke*” their children by placing *exceptional* or *undue* pressures on their children “to perform.” The goal of a father is *loving leadership*; to bring the child along at a *pace suitable for him or her*. It is *not* to treat the child as a “slave,” but to lovingly use a greater maturity to help the child achieve *their own* maturity.

5. (a) To *whom* is Paul *primarily* writing in 3:22-4:1? What is his *imperative* for them?

Paul writes a number of sentences of instruction to *Christian household slaves*; bondservants or literal slaves, who are also believers in Christ, that are under the mastery of another, for various reasons, including the financial. His imperative for the slave is to obey *and serve* their masters sincerely, out of a deeper submission to Christ. This is for the slave to recognize that the he or she is, in fact, serving Christ, and that his or her “reward” (even in a difficult situation) will come from the Lord when all forms of injustice or human servitude are erased and made right (see 5b below).

(b) From 3:24-25, what *incentive* does Paul believe sits at the heart of his instructions for Christian bondservants? How is this connected to the *primary indicative* of the book of Colossians?

For the slave that has been *unjustly* enslaved, God will (eventually!) right the wrong, with such a master being properly punished *by God*. The slave is to serve in whatever situation in which he or she resides *recognizing* that God will “balance the scales” one day. This is *consistent* with the coming of the Son of God into flesh: just as the *human Jesus* (the very Son of God) was “enslaved” by becoming a man, the Father *vindicated him* in this new role by raising him from the dead and seating him on the Throne of heaven. The God-man suffered in his life by being “forced” to live as a man (although willingly!), yet this situation became the very *foundation* of his exaltation, and the redemption of the world. The slave, then, is to see Christ in this way, submit himself to his master, serve the master well, and leave his “exaltation” from slavery to the day when God rights the wrong.

(c) Compare 4:1 to Ephesians 6:5-8 and Philemon 8-16. What was Paul’s view of *slavery* in his day, especially for *Christian* masters? How is this *instructive* for us in the church today?

Paul’s view of slavery can be gleaned both from what he *says* about slaves and masters, and what he *does not say* about the institution itself. Paul *does not* attempt to “overturn” the system of slavery that was common in his day: slavery was, *oftentimes*, purely voluntary amongst those who had a financial hardship and *needed* to serve a master *in order to survive*. Certainly Paul’s advice to Philemon would suggest that he *hoped* his brother in Christ would now receive the *converted* Onesimus back as a brother rather than a slave, but he makes *no such demands*. Given that slavery in the Roman empire was *ubiquitous*, Paul *never* attempts to change that system in his various letters. Instead, as here in Colossians, he suggests a *proper relationship* of individuals to the system, even to the point of suggesting that *Christian* slaves should act *extra carefully* towards their masters, and that *believing* masters *should do the same*. Certainly Paul would have *preferred* that no such system was *necessary*, but Paul’s theology recognized that, in a fallen world, the relationship between human beings was often messy.

6. Why do *you* think Paul would turn to these issues immediately after his instructions concerning the “new self?” Is there any *special significance* to these commands, per the above verses?

Fundamentally, as noted in the answers above, each of the persons in this pericope is being instructed on what it means, *in each role*, to “*put on*” the new self in Christ. *Christian* wives, husbands, children, slaves, and masters are all being given *quick* imperatives designed to suggest *how* they can, *in that role*, live out the Christian life *as Paul defines it*. Therefore, these verses are the *logical follow-up* to Christians in the church: in your various roles, be submissive, humble, patient, etc., and let the “*peace of Christ*” rule over whatever role in the world that the Lord has ordained over you.