

Lesson 11

Colossians 3:18 – 4:1

This section of Paul's instructions, along with similar passages in the NT, are referred to as 'household codes.' Paul gives instructions to six groups of people: wives, husbands, children, fathers, servants, and masters. At the end of this lesson, this passage is shown in parallel with Ephesians 5 and 6 (which also gives instructions to all six groups) and 1 Peter 2 and 3 (which only gives instructions to three of the groups). Besides these, similar instructions to (young) wives and servants are given by Paul in 1 Timothy 6:1-2 and Titus 2:4-5, 9-10.

Colossians 3:18 – 4:1

- 18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord^a.
 - 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh^b with them.
 - 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord^c.
 - 21 Fathers^d, do not provoke^e your children, lest they become discouraged^f.
 - 22 Bondservants^g, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service^h, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearingⁱ the Lord^j.
 - 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^k. You are serving^l the Lord Christ^m.
 - 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partialityⁿ.
- 1 Masters, treat your bondservants^o justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

- Notes
- a REB "that is your Christian duty"
 - b NJB "sharp"
 - c REB "that is the Christian way"
 - d NJB "Parents"
 - e NJB "irritate"; REB, NASU, HCSB "exasperate"
 - f NJV, NRSV, REB, NASU, HCSB "lose heart"
 - g KJV, ASV "servants"; NJB, NRSV, REB, NASU, HCSB, NAB, CEB, NIV "slaves"
 - h HCSB, NAB sim., CEB sim. "not only when you are being watched"
 - i NJB "out of respect for"; REB, NIV "out of reverence for"
 - j KJV "God"; NJB "Master"
 - k NJB "will repay you by making you his heirs"
 - l NAB "Be slaves of"
 - m NJB "Christ the Lord"
 - n KJV, ASV "respect of persons"; NJB, REB, HCSB, NIV "favoritism"; CEB "discrimination"
 - o KJV, ASV "servants"; NJB, NRSV, REB, NASU, HCSB, NAB, CEB, NIV "slaves"

Comments / Questions

1. Comparing this passage in Colossians to the parallel passage in Ephesians and 1 Peter, the first thing that is noticeable is the relative brevity of the Colossians' instructions, except the instructions to servants. Of course, we cannot read Paul's mind in this matter, but why might Paul have given more attention to servants in this letter to the Colossians?
2. The instructions themselves ("*Wives submit to husbands...*", "*Husbands love your wives...*", etc.) are consistent with other teaching by NT writers. It is the reasons that Paul gives that are particularly interesting.

- a. What is the point of Paul saying "*as is fitting in the Lord*" in his instructions to wives?

Is this different to Paul's command in Ephesians 5:22 "*as to the Lord*"?

- b. In Colossians, Paul does not give a reason why husbands are to love their wives, but note the extended reason he gives in Ephesians by drawing a parallel between a husband and his wife with Christ and the Church.

- c. Compare the reasons in Colossians and Ephesians why children are to "*obey their parents.*"

Is obeying your parents "*in the Lord*" (Ephesians) narrower than obeying them "*in everything*" (Colossians)?

- d. Compare the instructions to fathers in Colossians and Ephesians. What is the second command to fathers given in Ephesians?

- e. Although the words are slightly different, the meaning of Paul's instructions in Colossians and Ephesians to servants are the same. But, what additional warning does Paul give in Colossians that is not in Ephesians?

- f. Interestingly, Ephesians add the warning (which is essentially the same given to servants in Colossians) to the master.

3. Any reason to believe these instructions are any less authoritative for us as they were to the Colossians (or the Ephesians)?

"Mutual Submission"

"Mutual submission" is a label given to a common teaching today that is based on Ephesians 5:21. There, in concluding his thought on 'being filled with the Spirit' Paul writes "*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" This 'mutual submission' is then the suggested lens through which we are to read Ephesians 5:22ff. So, according to this teaching, not only is the wife to submit to the husband, but the husband is also to submit to wife. Not unsurprisingly, feminist theologians are passionate promoters of this view (but, of course, some male theologians also teach it).

However, to be fair with the text, this also means that parents are to submit (obey) their children and that masters are to submit to their servants. The only way one can defend either of those conclusions is to redefine the word 'submit' to mean something like 'having love for' or 'be humble towards'. In other words, to make these verses make the same point of passages like Philippians 2:3 "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*" But that is not what the word means. Consistently in the NT, 'submit' carries the idea of submitting to authority.

Paul's point seems clear: when one has authority over us, we are to be submissive to that authority. In some instances, we may be the parent, in others the servant. But, whatever the relationship, we are to be conduct ourselves as Christ would have us.

Ephesians 5 & 6

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

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ... ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ... ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²"Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³"that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

⁵Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

⁹Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Colossians 3 & 4

¹⁸Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

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

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

²²Bondservants, 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. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

¹Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

1 Peter 3

¹Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ²when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. ⁵For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

⁷Likewise, 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.

1 Peter 2

¹⁸Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.