

A Christian's New Life in the Home and at Work

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Key Verse: 3:23

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters....”

Our Christian life is not just a personal matter; it is relational. We should be a blessing in our homes, as well as in our societies. We usually behave well in church gatherings. But in our homes, we often relax and live according to our natural feelings. Then we are tempted to live by our earthly nature. We face another challenge in our workplaces. This is especially true if we see them as merely means to earn a living, and not as part of our Christian witness. For some, the workplace is private, maybe a cubicle. As long as they complete their assigned tasks, they can ignore everything else. For others, the workplace is a tightly knit social network in which conformity to a group mentality is demanded. It is easy to yield in such an atmosphere and lose our Christian identity and influence. Jesus commanded us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We Christians should be a blessing wherever we go. In today's passage Paul gives brief instructions on how to live as Christians in the home and at the workplace.

To better understand today's passage it is helpful to understand social life in Paul's times. The Colossian believers were influenced by both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures. In Jewish culture, women and children were ignored, and not even counted in numbering the population. Women had no legal rights. Husbands could divorce wives, but wives could not divorce husbands. Wives were treated as their husbands' slaves. In Greco-Roman culture, women had to absolutely obey their husbands. It was a patriarchal society. Children had no rights; they could be sold as slaves or even executed at their father's command. Slaves were treated as living tools. The only difference between a donkey and a slave was that the donkey could not speak, while the slave could speak. There were no labor unions or pro-labor laws. If slaves became old, sick or useless, they were abandoned. Slaves could not marry. If they had children, they became the master's property. In Paul's time, husbands and masters had all rights; wives, children and slaves had only obligations. Into this atmosphere the gospel brought Christian ethics. Christian ethics are not one-sided. They recognize the essential equality of people and the importance of each one filling their God-given role. They are timeless, for every society and generation. They were revolutionary in Paul's time. Let's learn what they mean to us today.

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I. Christian households (3:18-21)

Paul's letters to the Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon were all written at about the same time, to be circulated in all churches. Paul assumed that the Colossians would hear the letter to the Ephesians, which included more detailed instructions about Christian family life. So Paul did not repeat these instructions here. He wrote just a few brief, direct teachings. To understand Paul's full meaning, we can refer to the letter to the Ephesians.

First, a wife's obligation: submit (18). Let's read verse 18. **“Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”** Human beings do not like the word “submit.” It touches the rebellious spirit in our hearts. Even Mother Barry does not like to hear “submit.” So, when she was young, she named her horse “rebel.” But the Bible says, **“Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”** The Greek verb used here, “hoop-ot-as'-so,” means “to subject oneself willingly.” This submission does not imply inferiority. Jesus submitted himself to the Father during his life on earth. Yet he was in no way inferior to the Father. Wives submit themselves to their husbands, not by force, but willingly as equals. When making marriage vows, wives agree to this. Later, however, they forget. Some husbands try to remind them. But this only makes them more rebellious, and they say, “You love me first.” Then the two of them become like parallel lines that coexist on the same plane but never intersect. Wives must hear what God says to wives. Husbands must hear what God says to husbands. The Lord says to wives, **“submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”**

What does it mean, “as is fitting in the Lord”? This refers to God's original purpose in creation. As a new creation in Christ, we are now called to restore God's creation purpose in our marriages. Genesis teaches us that God is the Lord of the family. God created both male and female in his image (Gen 1:27). They are equals and partners in carrying out God's mission. However, their roles are different. The husband is the head of the family and the wife is a suitable helper. A wife must submit to her husband in order to fulfill God's purpose in creation. This is not blind obedience. If her husband is not right in God's sight, she must pray for him and try to help him. This calls for spiritual discernment and maturity.

Second, a husband's obligation: love (19). Verse 19 says, **“Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.”** A husband's obligation has two parts: what to do, and what to avoid. Husbands are commanded to love their wives. The word “love” comes from the Greek word “agape,” which means unconditional and

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sacrificial love, which transcends romantic love. It is a covenant love. Ephesians 5:25 explains more clearly: **“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...”** We were terrible sinners and unlovable. We were God's enemies. We did not deserve a relationship with God. But Christ died for us, shedding his blood on the cross. He gave his life to save us and to make us God's children. For this reason, the church willingly submits to Christ. Likewise, husbands can gain leadership through sacrificial love. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is compassionate and understanding. Peter tells husbands to be considerate and to treat their wives with respect (1 Pe 3:7). Women want their husbands to listen and understand them. When they communicate in this way, many problems can be solved. So husbands must listen to their wives carefully, even after a long day of work, when they are tired and want to watch sports.

Husbands must also know what not to do. They should not be harsh with their wives. This includes both verbal and physical abuse. If wives are treated harshly, they are deeply wounded. Husbands must never be violent with their wives. Generally, women are more sensitive. They need to be treated gently and kindly, both in word and in deed. When they are treated like princesses, they are happy. Food service in the home improves greatly.

Third, children's obligation: obey (20). Verse 20 says, **“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”** A child's basic attitude toward his or her parents should be one of obedience. When children learn obedience to their parents at an early age, they can grow in humanity and spirituality. But children can think that obedience is nerdy and rebellion is cool. So they become rebellious. Some children become rebellious to receive attention from their parents. Others do so out of bitterness over injustice. Still others think that rebellion expresses boldness and courage. Is this true? True boldness and courage comes from obedience. The boy Samuel lived in the temple as a child. He received internship training humbly in the midst of bad influence from Eli's family. He grew bold in speaking God's truth - even God's message of judgment against Eli's house. The best example to children is our Lord Jesus. Jesus was obedient to his parents (Lk 2:51). He was obedient to his Father God, through much suffering (Heb 5:8-9).

Children's obedience to parents is based on the Ten Commandments. Ultimately, it is obedience to God. Therefore, if parents command something contrary to God's word, children should not obey. If a parent tells a child to abandon God, worship idols, lie, steal, or murder, the child should not obey, standing on God's truth. God's truth applies to both parents and children. So the

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words "in everything," mean that children must obey whatever their parents tell them, unless it is contrary to God's truth. The main reason children should obey their parents is that it pleases the Lord. When we please the Lord, the Lord blesses us. Ephesians 6:3 promises, "...that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Do you want everything to go well and to live a long life? Then, obey your parents. God will bless you; it is his promise. It also makes parents happy.

Fourth, parents' obligation: do not embitter (21). Verse 21 says, **"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."** The Greek word "pat-ayr" translated "Father" mainly applies to one's natural father, but can also refer to both parents. Paul did not tell parents to "love your children," or "care for your children," but said, "do not embitter" your children. Why? It is because parents naturally love their children and care for them (Mt 7:11). However, they need to be told not to embitter them. Parents can embitter their children in a variety of ways. When people marry, they have children as a fruit of love. Parents raise their children through much sacrifice. In doing so, they tend to think of them as their own possessions and can be very demanding. They may also try to fulfill their own dream through their children, and drive them relentlessly to the point of exasperation. On the other hand, some parents neglect their children. Then children are discouraged. They stop growing and practice deviant behavior. Parents do not understand the deep frustration of their children. Yet the child's bad behavior was the outcome of poor parenting. So there is a saying, "Behind bad children, there are bad parents."

Children are not possessions of their parents. Children are entrusted to parents by God. So, parents have an obligation to God in rearing their children. Parents should find their children's God-given talents and aid in developing them so that they may be equipped to live according to God's purpose. Parents should not overemphasize education in humanity, and be sure to provide spiritual training that helps their children to know God. Paul wrote to Timothy, **"...how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures..."** (2 Ti 3:15). Timothy's mother Eunice, and grandmother, Lois, must have read Bible stories to baby Timothy and sang hymns to him. Many great servants of God began Bible study from infancy. It was their parents who helped them lay a foundation for their lives on the word of God. Christian parents have an obligation to provide a good spiritual atmosphere for their children to grow in. The best way is for parents to love God wholeheartedly and live according to the word of God at home, setting a good example for their children.

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II. Christian work ethics (3:22-4:1)

In this part Paul mainly instructs slaves, and also masters. The slave and master relationship was quite different from that of employees and employers. However, the principles that Paul taught still apply to us.

First, a slave or employee's obligation: work with all your heart (3:22-25).

Thus far, Paul instructed wives, husbands, children and parents briefly--one verse each. But in this part, Paul uses four verses to instruct slaves. He must have felt it was important. In the church at Colossae there were many slaves. They could think that as Christians, equal with their masters, they no longer had to obey. So there was tension between masters and slaves in the church. For this reason, Paul taught slaves a proper attitude toward their masters in the Lord.

Look at verse 22. **“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.”** Paul's teaching challenged a typical slave's mentality. When their masters were not present, they became lazy and did not work hard. They had no motivation. They did not work creatively. If believing slaves did not work hard, they would have looked no different than idol worshiping slaves. Their confession of faith in Christ would have become hypocritical. This discredits the name of Christ as though he has no practical effect on his worshipers. So Paul said in verse 23, **“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human masters....”** Christian slaves must work for the Lord, not just for people. When they do, it reveals Christ's presence in their working place, and gives credibility to their Christian witness.

In this part we learn an important principle that applies to employees in our times. Generally, employees work for money. They work as much as they are paid. Often they care little about truth or sincerity. But Christian employees should not work only for money. Basically we must work for the Lord. So we must recognize the Lord's presence in our workplaces. We must work in a way that pleases God in accordance with the truth. A Christian's place of employment is a mission field, not just a means of earning a living. The Lord has placed us in our workplaces as Christ's ambassadors. People see us as representatives of Christ. If we are lazy, irresponsible and selfish, it dishonors Christ in our workplace. But when we do excellent work and are faithful and serve others with the mind of Christ, we can reveal Christ in our workplaces. Then Christ is honored and we can be a blessing to others.

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Keith F is a former principal of Lane Tech High School. He was a devout Christian who lived by faith at his workplace. He kept a Bible on his desk and often quoted Bible verses to staff members. He worked hard and strove for excellence in all he did. He hired many excellent Christian teachers, including some UBF members. Under his leadership the school experienced a significant academic renewal and Christ was honored. As another example, Jeremy Lin is a Harvard graduate. He became famous recently as one of the few Asian-American professional basketball stars. According to his Facebook page, Colossians 3:23 is one of his key verses. He works with passion and diligence to be the best player he can be. He has inspired his teammates and helped them to win important games. In doing so, he has brought honor to Christ and made Christ known to many others.

In verses 24-25 Paul gives the motivation for slaves to work hard. **In the first place, they receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward (24a).** In Paul's time, slaves were rarely rewarded, even when they worked hard. Thinking they deserved a reward, many slaves stole money and ran away from their masters. This kind of reward does not last long and brings more trouble than it is worth. However, Christian slaves should know that they will receive a reward from the Lord. God's reward is an inheritance in his kingdom that never fades away. This can motivate us to work hard, not just for our bosses, but for the Lord. Paul said in verse 24b, **"It is the Lord Christ you are serving."** Our jobs are given to us by the Lord, not just men. So we should work hard for the glory of God, seeking his reward.

In the second place, God is just. Verse 25 says, **"Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism."** Whether one is a master or a slave, if he does wrong, he will be punished by the Lord. Many masters mistreated their slaves. Slaves had no rights or recourse to obtain justice. They just had to bear it. This was not easy. In their frustration many slaves justified doing wrong in return. But as the saying goes, "Two wrongs don't make a right." We must know that God is just. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid. The Bible says that God will deal with each person and give what is due him, according to each one's deeds (Ro 2:6-8).

Second, a master or employer's obligation: provide what is right and fair (4:1). 4:1 says, **"Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."** Masters were generally not concerned about the well-being of their slaves, but only about using them to make money. Masters did not consider right and wrong in their treatment of slaves, for they thought of slaves as their property. But Paul taught masters that

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what they possessed was not theirs; it was God's. They also had a Master in heaven. They were just stewards of their Master in heaven. So they must provide for their slaves what is right and fair. It is the same for employers in our times too. When we consider this passage, it seems that Paul's teachings about slaves protected the slavery system. But this is not true. Paul's concern was for each individual to live as a new creation in Christ in their given situation. When they did so, they could bring change to their society. Fundamental change comes from the transformation of a human heart. Many reform minded people focus on changing systems, circumstances or situations. But Paul focused on changing people. Changed people can bring about a changed society. In the course of time, the influence of changed people brought an end to slavery in the Roman Empire.

In this passage we have learned how to live as Christians in our homes and at work. Fundamentally, we need to see Christ as Lord in every area of our lives. The word "Lord" appears six times in the nine verses we have studied today. Christ is the Lord of our families and of our workplaces. Our homes and workplaces are venues to serve Christ. So, instead of demanding others to do their duty for us, we should seek to do our duty before Christ. Then we can grow endlessly in Christ's character. Christ is not only our Lord, but also our example. He teaches us how to submit, love, obey, raise children, work hard and provide for others. We should fix our eyes on Jesus and keep learning from him. As he works in us, our homes and workplaces will be blessed. We can experience the kingdom of God and reveal his glory. So let's live by faith in Christ practically in our homes and at work.