

“The Christian Family” (I)
Colossians 3:18-19 (NRSV)

We’ve considered **how Jesus Christ fulfills the cosmos** as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”; as the One who is “before all things, and in [whom] all things hold together”; as the One who is “the head of the body, the church”; as the One who is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead”; as the One in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”; as the One “through [whom] God was pleased to reconcile ... all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:15, 17-20). Now we will look at **how Christ fulfills our human relationships**. Christians rightly have a high and exalted view of Jesus Christ. Now says Paul, Christians ought also to learn how knowing him, how experiencing him, makes a difference in our day-to-day relationships.

In earlier studies of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians we saw the cosmic, supra-mundane Christ; here all is domestic and totally mundane. We move from thinking about his and our place in the universe to thinking about how we behave in the living room, the kitchen and the bedroom.

The entire subsection of Colossians 3:18-4:1 could be entitled **“How to Have a Full and Satisfying Christian Family Life.”** The text contains three sets of exhortations: 3:18-19 has to do with the relationship of husbands and wives, 3:20-21 with the relationship of parents and children; and verses 3:22-4:1 with the relationship of servants and masters. I will deal with each one in turn on three successive Sundays.

Colossians 3:18-19 is patently domestic. It has to do with **the home**, specifically **a Christian home**. Moreover, it has to do with **the relationship between a Christian husband and a Christian wife**. Others may not wish to pay attention to, or try to understand follow the Bible’s advice, but Christians usually do. Moreover, it is important to note that the passage has nothing to say about men’s and women’s roles in society, such as in the marketplace or politics. There are other biblical texts that give us some guidance in these areas, but we do Scripture a great disservice by applying it where it was never intended to apply. The teaching here is for Christians who want to live as Christians within their homes and experience all the fullness God intended for them.

It is teaching that is much needed today when marriage has fallen into disrepute, when common law relationships are perfectly legal and considered to be just as good if not better than marriage. The story is told of **a seven-year-old girl** who had just seen the Disney movie “**Cinderella**” and was testing her friend’s knowledge of the story. Her friend, anxious to impress, said, “I know what happens at the end.” “What?” asked the girl. “Cinderella and the prince live happily ever after.” To which the girl replied, “Oh no, they didn’t. They got married!” It was totally innocent, unwitting cynicism. Others, like the English dramatist, **William Congreve**, who wrote, “Every man plays the fool once in his life, but to marry is playing the fool all of one’s life” are more calculated. I have to tell you, too, that such thoughts aren’t limited to non-Christians. When I was married, now almost 38 years ago, my minister gave me a book entitled “How to Be Happy Though Married.” I kid you not! I’ve since gotten rid of that book. I don’t believe that such thoughts are true, and I’d never want to pass on such stupid thoughts to others.

1. **Fullness in Marriage** (Col. 3:18-19).

Contrary to what you might think, the Scripture we are considering this morning is **radically elevating**. “Wives be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and never treat them harshly” (3:18-19).

I admit, that to twenty-first-century ears, this text might sound rather demeaning. But consider how the text contradicts the way in which husbands in the ancient middle-eastern world would usually be encouraged to treat their wives. **William Barclay** tells us:

Under Jewish law a woman was a thing; she was the possession of her husband, just as much as his house or his flocks or his material goods were. She had no legal right whatever. For instance, under Jewish law a man could divorce his wife for any cause, a wife had no rights whatever in the initiation of divorce. In Greek society a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She never appeared on the streets alone, not even to go marketing. She lived in women’s apartments and did not join [the men] even for meals. From her there was demanded complete servitude and chastity; but her husband could go out as much as he chose and enter into as many relationships outside marriage as he liked and incur no stigma. Both under Jewish

and under Greek laws and customs, all the privileges belonged to the husband, and all the duties to the wife (p. 192-193).

Even today, in certain more conservative, Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures this is still the way it is.

But the domestic rules given here in Colossians send out **a vastly different message**. Wives are **addressed equally** here with their husbands, something totally, radically different and new. Also, **both husbands and wives have privileges** -- not just the men, **and duties** -- not just the wives (Peter T. O'Brian, Word Biblical Commentary, 1982, p. 218-219). Men and women are **both addressed as being "in the Lord."** This radically new way of looking at things gives **equal privilege** to both men and women. It is **a mutual privilege** that ought to radically change the way people behave with each other. If every Christian is **"in the Lord,"** then each of us is under the Lordship of Christ as an equal, and the totality of how each one of us lives our life is to be regulated by this gracious, saving reality. Christ loves each of us equally, men and women, boys and girls. And Christ demands an equal love for each other, including men and women, boys and girls, from each of us. Given the former hierarchical situation in the ancient world, this is especially, immensely elevating to women and girls, and it set afoot a dynamic that raised the position of women and girls so much that it can even be said to have affected the appropriate status women enjoy today in the western world.

There is **something else** I want you to notice in the dynamic set loose in these two verses of Scripture.

Some will say that they perpetuate a correct hierarchical view within the marriage relationship. **F. F. Bruce**, a commentator I normally admire, stated, that the apostle Paul "does hold that there is a divinely instituted hierarchy in the order of creation, and [that] in this order the place of the wife comes after her husband" (1957, p. 289). Also, recently, I read in a newspaper article, given to me by Martin Gove, of an Anglican vicar named **Angys MacLeay**, at St. Nicholas Church in Kent, England, who averred, "women [including, presumably his wife] should be silent and obey their husbands" (The International Express, Tues. Feb. 23, 2010, p. 15).

But, based on my reading of other biblical texts, I disagree that this is the correct interpretation of this text.

In the preface of a parallel passage to the one we are considering today about the relationship of husbands to wives, found in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul states, Christian husbands and wives can summarize their relationship this way: **“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”** (Eph. 5:21). There is a **mutual, interchangeable meaning** to be found in the phrases **to “be subject”** and **to “love.”** They actually mean the same thing. To be willing to “be subject” to one another -- according to the differences of strength and weakness, gifts and graces each one of us possesses -- is to “love” one another. And to “love” one another is to be willing to “be subject” to one another whenever that is appropriate. But it ought not to be the case that the wife is always to subject herself to her husband, nor that the husband should always be subject to his wife. If that happens, it isn’t hard to see that we will likely have problems in the relationship and in the marriage.

Just as should be found in the relationships between people in society, a mutual exchange of love between husband and wife exemplifies the best that Jesus Christ calls forth from each other.

2. **Fullness through the wife** (3:18).

Thus for the wife to “be subject” to her husband is a natural way of responding to the relationship with love. Sure, there will be times, in spite of our modern assertive, rights-seeking, power-hungry culture, when husbands may take the lead. There are times when he may make the final decision. And there will be times when the wife will have the best idea. So much communication and mutual understanding and frequent negotiation among husband and wife will need to take place. Mind you, to “be subject” is not a synonym for servile, menial bondage. The appeal is to free, responsible equal people and can only be heeded voluntarily. Moreover, none are called to follow it into sin or irrationality or harm of any kind. “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). This is a charge for Christians who seek to live as Christians.

3. **Fullness through the husband** (3:19).

Likewise husbands are to love their wives and never treat them harshly. If we read this carefully we will see that this commandment is as radical to husbands as the one for wives. Interestingly enough, another commentator has noted such a command doesn’t appear in any of the extra-Biblical household rules of the day. “Pre-Christian antiquity knew of the terms ‘to

love/love' ... but in the Hellenistic world these terms do not occur in rules for the household" (**Eduard Lohse**, 1971, p. 158). That means a husband's love for his wife is a new, Christian thing. But, since Jesus Christ came – who treated women with dignity and respect -- it is the right thing to do. Unceasing care and loving service for the wife's entire well-being was light-years beyond the formal domestic ethics of the day.

The parallel passage in Ephesians goes on to say that this means that husbands are to "love [their] wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). **This radical command to love is only fulfilled when a husband loves his wife in imitation of Christ's love.**

What a standard for real, fleshed-out, incarnational love! Further, husbands are to "love their wives as [much] they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:28a). After all, in marriage two have "become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This is a high calling indeed, and may seem impossible to achieve. Yet, listen to me, husbands; it is possible to incarnate ourselves into our wives' emotions and mental thoughts! Believe me when I say this: if you spend much quality time in active, listening conversation with each other it will become easier and easier to do. It is possible to love our wives as we love our bodies. Women know how to do this intuitively; men have to learn it.

Dr. Robert Seizer, in his book Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery (1976), tells of performing surgery to remove a tumour in which it was necessary to sever a facial nerve, leaving a young woman's mouth permanently twisted in palsy. In Dr. Seizer's own words:

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamp light, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks, "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes, I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut.." She nods and is silent.. But the young man smiles, "I like it," he says; "it is kind of cute." All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works (p. 45-46).

It's possible to love your spouse as your own body. Practically, this means the husband must do all he can to understand her world.

4. **Fullness together** (Col. 3:18-19).

The dynamic that is spoken of in these two short verses is interdependence, developing a mutual understanding and working together.

I am amazed at many contemporary husbands who are in charge of their children for days on end. They fix all the meals, change hundreds of diapers, settle quarrels, fix hurts, clean up catastrophes, give baths, read night-time stories and help them say their prayers each and every day, before and after work – taking an active part in the child-rearing -- when their wives are also working out of the home, or when they are unwell, or need a break. I could have learned a thing or two from them.

Loving incarnationally, interdependently, means we must work at spending time together. For Colleen and I this is natural to us by now. We frequently have coffee together. We frequently read together and share what we have read with each other. We garden together. We go to music concerts together.

A recent issue of **Psychology Today** (1986) carried an article entitled “Marriages made to Last” in which they surveyed several hundred happily married couples. The interviews were conducted privately, spending time also with each spouse, separately, alone. The top two things most of them said kept a marriage going were: **“My spouse is my best friend”** and **“I like my spouse as a person.”** The researchers concluded good marriages develop among those who purposely spend a lot of time together.

Along with this, loving incarnationally, interdependently means listening to each other. As **Howard Hendricks** said, “Marriage is sometimes the dialogue of the deaf” (and I don't think he was talking about those who need hearing aids). The **Harvard Business Review** says 65% of an executive's time should be spent listening. So much more in our intimate relationships. “If one gives answer before hearing it is folly and shame” says the book of Proverbs (18:13). Those of us who are ready of tongue have more to learn here. **Incarnational, interdependent love spends time, listens, and gives itself.** Such was and is Christ's love.

Christ's archetypal love gave so much of himself that it can only be described as **sacrificial**. What does that mean? Well, it will help husbands make a good decision about whether we ought to take the free tickets to the hockey game or stay home and fix the faucets as we said we would. Of course, this works both ways.

When **Anne Morrow** married **Charles Lindbergh**, she was a timid, young woman, and he, having been the first to cross the Atlantic Ocean solo by air, was one of the most famous men in all the world. He was the prototypical American "eagle" – a bona fide national hero. She could easily have been swept aside in all the adulation that came his way. But loved by him, she grew to become one of the United States most popular writers. Here is how she put what happened:

To be deeply in love is, of course, a great liberating force and the most common experience that frees.... Ideally, both members of a couple in love free each other to new and different worlds. I was no exception to the general rule. The sheer fact of finding myself loved was unbelievable and changed my world, my feelings about life and about myself. I was given confidence, strength and almost a new character. The man I was to marry believed in me and what I could do, and consequently I found I could do more than I realized (quoted, Charles Swindoll, "Love Without a Net," Think It Over, Evangelical Free Church, Fullerton CA).

The eagle's soaring love caused shy, delicate Anne Morrow to fly too. I notice that's the way **David and Ruby Kandal** operate. That's the way **Don and Eileen Hunter** operate as well. And countless others in this congregation. They care for one another "through thick and through thin." They truly love one another in very practical ways. That's what sacrificial love can do. It shines in their eyes and it shows in their lives. Sacrificial love elevates both partners in the marital relationship. Mutual submission and mutual love: there is no other way.

Amen

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