

“Who Runs Your Family?”

Philippians 2:1-18 • Colossians 3:16-4:1

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 13, 2019

All of us probably have favorite passages from the Bible, verses that seem to resonate with us or give us comfort. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, to whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.” “I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” I’m sure you could share even more that are meaningful in your life.

But when we dig into the Scriptures we find that there are sometimes passages that we’d rather skip over or that even seem wrong to us. Maybe we think, “that doesn’t sound like the God I know,” or some people go so far as to say, “If that’s what God says, I’m not interested.” It seems to me that his morning’s passage which includes “wives submit to your husbands” is one of those passages.

So the first question we want to address is how we are to deal with difficult parts of the Bible like this. Let’s begin by looking at the mistakes others have made. These are ways people have tried to deal with difficult teachings in the Bible but that have led them away from the truth. First, some people simply *reject* the passage. They might say that it’s not really God’s word. An example of this kind of thinking is the Jesus Seminar, which was a group of biblical scholars who got together and voted on which of the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Bible they believed he actually said. In the end they voted against over 80% of the things Jesus said in the gospels, including John 3:16.

The second way people have tried to solve the problem is to *relegate* the passage to the time it was written, believing that it is no longer relevant to modern life. A third way which is similar to relegating it to the past is to *reinterpret* the passage, changing the meaning to be more “contemporary.” An example of this is the famous 20th Century commentator who said that the “miracle” of Jesus feeding the 5,000

was not that he multiplied the bread and the fish but that he inspired the people who had actually brought food to share it with others. Of course that’s not at all what the Bible says and misses the point of the story.

The truth is that we shouldn’t look for ways around the difficult parts of Scripture. What we need is to *respect* them as the Word of God. As 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The primary issue is where the Bible gets its authority. You either believe that the Bible is God’s Word and therefore speaks with the authority of God, or you will believe that *you* have authority over the Bible. I will tell you that our faith rests on the Bible as God’s Word.

There is plenty of evidence that the Bible that we read today is accurate and that it applies to your life. So when you come across something that doesn’t seem right you should respect God’s Word and realize that you may not understand what it means or how it applies to your life. Your attitude should be that of Anselm, the 11th Century Archbishop of Canterbury who coined the phrase, “faith seeking understanding.” The idea is that we begin with faith and then try to learn more in order to understand more fully.

And that brings us to this morning’s passage in Colossians. In verse 18 Paul says, “Wives, submit to your husbands.” This verse could be the supreme example for rejecting, relegating, and reinterpreting Scripture. This may be one of the most misunderstood or even despised passages in the Bible. This is one of those passages that preachers try to avoid. But if you will listen closely I think you’ll find that it’s actually an amazing passage.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 is often referred to as a “household code,” because it describes how members of a household should relate to one another. Household codes were common in the

ancient world. In the Roman Empire everyone knew their place in society. It was a patriarchal society, meaning that the husband, father, and master had all authority. At first glance it seems that this passage echoes the same understanding. But as we will discover, the new humanity created in Christ Jesus radically challenges and changes that old order.

Paul mentions rules for the three primary household relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants or slaves. Because so many people get tripped up on the part about wives and husbands we're going to look at each of these relationships in reverse order, beginning with slaves and masters. If we're lucky we'll run out of time before we get to wives submitting. Don't worry. We won't run out of time. The Cowboys don't play until after 3 today.

Scholars estimate that there were around 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. That's roughly half of the population. While slavery then was quite different from the slavery in America, it was still slavery. One person owned another person as property. In this passage Paul doesn't make any statements about whether slavery is right or wrong. Instead, he challenges those who are involved in the system to change their understanding. He tells those who are slaves, "obey in everything your earthly (or human) masters." He goes on to tell them that they should work hard all the time because they are really working for Jesus. The reason is because it is from Jesus that they will receive "the inheritance as your reward." Slaves generally didn't inherit anything but Paul says that in Jesus they will receive an inheritance. That inheritance or reward is eternal life. Through Paul God says that even slaves have great value in His Kingdom. The gospel is always hope for the hopeless.

But it's more radical than just that. He then says, "Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly." In other words, treat your servants as if they have value. Make sure they have everything they need. The reason here is because the masters also have a Master in

heaven – Jesus. In fact, as Romans 6 says, every follower of Jesus is now a slave of righteousness, a servant of God.

Next we come to the rules for children and parents. Again, it would seem unremarkable, especially in that society, for there to be rules that children are to obey their parents. But again there is a radical change here. In the ancient world children were really no different than slaves. They weren't considered people. But Paul's instruction assumes that the children are involved in the church and would hear the letter read and more importantly that they can actually choose to obey. What the Bible is saying is that children should *want* to obey their parents because it pleases the Lord. Of course this doesn't mean that children should obey their parents when it's immoral, illegal, or leads to someone getting hurt. This assumes godly parents and children in the context of a Christian family.

Even more astonishing is that Paul then addresses the parents with rules for them. He specifically directs this at fathers because this teaching goes against the cultural standards of the time, but it applies equally to mothers as well. He says to parents, "do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." Parenting is hard work. Sometimes parents can be too harsh on their children. I was at the gas station a few weeks ago and overheard a mother constantly berating her children and it broke my heart. By the time they are teenagers they will be discouraged and will not want to obey. Parents, your job is to live in a way that your children enjoy obeying you.

Finally, we come to the issue of wives and husbands. Verse 18 says, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Notice first of all that it doesn't say wives *obey* your husbands. Paul did use the word "obey" when addressing children and slaves, but not wives. The radical idea here is mutuality. The wife and husband are equals. This was unheard of at the time.

We tend to think of the word submit as indicating that the other person is superior.

And it can certainly have that meaning. But that would be closer in meaning to obeying. To submit means you have a choice, you have the authority and ability. I think a better way to understand would be to think of dancing. When you see people dance who really know how to dance and who work as a team it's an amazing thing to watch. Shows like *Dancing with the Stars* show us how that can work. Perhaps the greatest dance partners of all time were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I saw this quote recently and I think it applies here: "Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did only she did it backwards and in high heels." The point is that they were equals in every way when they danced but to make it work she willingly followed his lead.

At this point we need to look at the other half of this command. Verse 19 says, "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them." As we talked about last week, love is not a feeling. Love is action and true love is always in the way of Jesus, which is sacrifice. When Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives,"

what he's saying is that husbands are to sacrifice for their wives. They are to put their wife's needs and desires ahead of their own. In other words, love your wife means the same thing as submit to your husband. As followers of Jesus we are each called to put aside our own desires and even needs in order to meet those of our spouse. If both husband and wife do this consistently then what happens is that each of your needs are met and that pleases God. That's what it means to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

So you are called to love sacrificially just like Jesus does. You are to put the needs of your spouse, your children, your parents, your boss, and your employees ahead of your own. When each of us is treating each other this way we will experience the real fullness of relationships that result from living in the Kingdom of God.

Amen.