

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Colossians 3:18-21 Happy Families.

These are important verses this morning because they concern relationships within the family. And such relationships are important because the health and wellbeing of society depends upon the health and wellbeing of the families within society. The family is the basic building block of any nation. We should not be too surprised therefore if such verses stir up controversy because the enemy of our souls and of humanity, the devil, targets families so that he can weaken whole societies. Satan knows full well that when family relationships are dysfunctional then whole nations are affected and are in big trouble.

The hostility of some people against these commands today therefore do not have their origin in man but in powers far greater – in spiritual powers bent on destruction and keeping men and women in spiritual bondage and misery. We therefore expect *fierce* opposition to the things which God says through his apostle today. These things are important for they concern the most fundamental relationships in life apart from our relationship with God.

The verse before seems rather vague when you first read it. [Read verse 17](#). Any vagueness however suddenly disappears when the next verses are read. And there is always a practical and very *down to earth* aspect to the Christian life. It is not all theoretical and ‘airy fairy’. Our new relationship to God is played out in very real situations and relationships. How we relate to others is always to be done *in the name of the Lord Jesus*. For it is in such relationships that we honour God and give him thanks.

Verses 18 and 19 concern the relationship between **husbands and wives**. [Read verse 18, 19](#). Let me suggest three reasons why you should not switch off at this point if you are not married. The first reason is that you may get married in the future. The second reason is that you will want to pray for people who are married, and you may be involved in counselling them, formally or informally. But the third reason is that the marriage between a man and woman in Scripture is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church. And that is relevant to you.

So first we have the apostle’s word to wives. [Read verse 18](#). Since it’s so brief, it would be good to turn to other places in the New Testament where Christ, through his apostles, addresses wives. [Read Ephesians 5:22-24](#). [1 Peter 3:1-6](#).

Back to our verse today again. [Read Colossians 3:18](#). What for you is the important part of the verse? Is it the unmentionable ‘s’ word? In fact the most important part is the second half - *as is fitting in the Lord*. This attitude is fitting and appropriate for a wife who is *in the Lord*. Throughout the second half of this letter to the Colossians Paul is telling us how being ‘in the Lord’ works out in various relationships – relationships within the church, relationships at work, relationships between parents and children and relationships between husbands and wives.

So the important question is, “How does Christ want me to relate to my husband? In my marriage, how can I please the Lord and serve him? How do I relate to my husband ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God for this relationship’?” Well, the wife is to submit to her husband. You may ask, “Why should I submit to him?” Because this is the Lord’s will for you in this relationship. You may say, “But why is it the Lord’s will?”

Paul tells us in Ephesians that the husband is the *head of the wife*. “But why has God made the husband ‘the head of the wife’ and what does that mean anyway?” It means that God has given the

husband a certain authority over his wife. As we shall see in a moment, this authority is so that the wife might be cared for by her husband.

God has given a number of ‘authority structures’ within society for our blessing and peace. But because people are prone to rebel against God, we naturally rebel against these structures. But God has given parents an authority over their children. He has given some authority over others in the work place. He has given civil government authority over their people. He has given authority to some within the church. And he has given authority to a husband over his wife. It is all part of God’s ordering of society and his common grace to humanity. But naturally we want to rebel against them because we are naturally rebels against God. And yet behind our rebellion is the devil, that ancient serpent.

The fact that a husband is his wife’s head goes back to the beginning and to the garden of Eden. The fact that Adam was formed first is significant. The fact that Eve was formed out of the man is significant. The fact that Eve was created to be Adam’s helper is significant and the fact that Adam named Eve is also significant.

And as any wife begins to work out what it means for her to be ‘in Christ’ she will discover that it involves the way she relates to her husband. Indeed her submitting to him should be a picture to others of the church’s submission to Christ.

Notice please that the command of verse 18 is addressed to the woman. It is not addressed to the man. In one, sense this has nothing to do with the man. Paul does not say, “Husbands, make sure you wife submits to you.” No, he is addressing the women. This is something between her and Christ. She is to submit to her husband voluntarily out of reverence for Christ. And so, if for any reason she refuses to submit to her husband, she is refusing to submit to Christ, and that in turn will affect her relationship to Christ. She will grieve her Lord and Saviour.

Now as we shall see, the command Paul gives does not make her a door mat or a slave or someone who is not allowed to speak freely and express opinions or use her gifts. The Christian couple will discuss things fully together and plan together. And the command certainly does not mean that the wife is in any way inferior to the husband, less intelligence or that she is a second class citizen.

Indeed many think that this apostolic command to the wife came as a result of the new found freedom which women found in Christ. Contrary to their culture, they now knew they were equal with men - equal in worth and equal in dignity before God. And so perhaps this is a reminder that yes, in the Lord you are indeed equal, but it is still the Lord’s will that you respect your husband, encourage him in his God given headship - and not seek to rule over him.

We then come to Paul’s instruction to the Christian husband. [Read verse 19](#). It would be interesting to know how the new teaching in the Colossian church was affecting relationships within the family. We’re not told. But we do know that following God’s commands enriches marriages. Again it’s helpful to read other New Testament verses addressed to Christian husbands. [Read Ephesians 5:25-33](#). [Read 1 Peter 3:7](#). Then our verse today. [Read Colossians 3:19](#) again.

How is the husband to love his wife? He is to love his wife tenderly and as Christ loved the church. If the wife’s relationship to her husband is to portray the church’s love and submission to Christ, then the husband’s love for his wife is to be a picture of the Lord’s love for his church. He is to love her sacrificially. The husband is to give himself for his wife. His headship over her is a God given authority to protect her, provide for her and encourage her to reach her full potential, both in terms of what she does on the earth and in terms of her relationship with the Lord Jesus.

The husband is to be unselfish towards his wife, praying for her and with her. And as any husband works out his new found life in Christ, that will determine how he relates to his wife. I

always think it's one of the most difficult and challenging commands in the Bible. *Love your wife as Christ loves the church*. The husband is therefore to study his wife over the years so that he may learn how to love her. What is it she needs to become the person God intended her to be. How can I facilitate her to be the women of God she potentially is.

[Read verse 19](#). There is every possibility of course for a husband to be harsh with his wife. He is usually stronger than her physically. But the husband must not be harsh with his wife. I have more than once preached on 3:12-17 at a wedding. These verses are not just describing relationships within the church. They are describing relationships within a marriage too. [Read verses 12-17](#). Now the husband is to take the lead in such behaviour. He is also to take the lead spiritually as the couple pray together or read the Scriptures together. As he works out how he is to serve the Lord Jesus Christ this will involve the way he loves his wife. He will not expect her to serve him. On the contrary, like the Lord Jesus, he will take a towel and wash her feet. There is nothing he is not willing to do for her. Nothing he feels is beneath his 'dignity'. This is his wife. He will care for her tenderly. He will not be harsh with her.

Now we all know that in history, men and husbands have often been harsh with women and wives. And although we do not preach these words from Scripture apologetically - for this God's good design for marriage, nevertheless, as we hear of ways that men have mistreated women in the past and yes, as we reflect on our own behaviour at times, we are sorry. It does grieve us. Nevertheless this is what we are aiming for.

Husbands, love your wives. Seek to present her before Christ one day as a godly women who knows and loves the Lord. Encourage her. Be tender, gentle and patient with her. Forsake all others for her because the way you love your wife should be a picture to others of the way that Christ has loved his church. You witness for him by the way you treat your wife.

Now I suggest that when a married couple have these attitudes towards one another, they are happy. I also suggest that when a husband begins to treat his wife in this way, the wife will not find it difficult to submit to him. And yet of course the challenge is that the wife is still called to submit to an imperfect husband! Every couple has to work out the details of these things for themselves and of course in real life, circumstances can get very complicated. Paul does not attempt to produce a manual on the subject. But he does give important principles. And God will help us as we look to him and pray to him. **Husbands and wives.**

Then secondly and more briefly in verses 20 and 21, **parents and children**. [Read verses 20, 21](#). These verses tell us of another, but different authority which God has given to society in his common grace. And it concerns the relationship between parents and their children. First Paul addresses children. [Read verse 20 again](#). What is interesting here is that Paul addresses *children* about this matter and not their parents. Paul doesn't tell parents to make sure their children obey them - although we have to say that there *are* verses in the Bible which instruct parent so do just this - mainly in the book of Proverbs.

There are ways for parents to insist their children obey them. But here it is the children themselves that Paul addresses. [Read verse 20 again](#). He therefore expects the children to hear this command because they are with their parents in church. Paul expects the children to be in the gathering of believers on the Lord's day and he expects the children to hear his teaching. It is also interesting that the motivation he gives to the child for obeying the parent is that this will *please the Lord*. And this must mean that Paul knows children can be true believers in the Lord - who will want to please the Lord.

But as the child or young person is working out his or her relationship with the Lord Jesus, they should know that it pleases the Lord when they obey their parents. This is the Lord's will for them. Notice that both parents are named here - not just the father. Both parents are to be respected and obeyed. Both parents will therefore give the child instructions and commands. And the child is to

obey the parents *in everything* – except of course if that command is clearly sinful. But the obedience is not to be selective. In everything the child is to obey.

God is caring for the child through its parents. Therefore the child will please the Lord by *obeying* his or her parents. It's a different word to that used in verse 18. The wife is to be *subject* to her husband. But the child is to *obey* its parents.

Now that may not seem very *exciting* to the child. Especially if the child is a believer, he or she may look for more 'exciting' ways to serve the Lord and get to know the Lord. But the child will serve the Lord and know the Lord's blessing as they obey their parents, especially when they do it for his sake. He or she will learn what it is to please the Lord. He or she will be trained up to obey the Lord more directly when they are older. And it is good for society when children obey their parents, just as it is a good witness for Christ whenever the world sees a Christian child willingly obey mum and dad out of reverence for Christ. Now that is impressive!

Then finally Paul addresses the fathers. [Read verse 21](#). There were very few commands like *this* one in society at that time. People often ask why the mother is not addressed. After all, from verse 20, the child is to expect both the father and mother to give instructions.

It's probably because the father is more likely to *fail* in this area. How does the father embitter the child? How does the father discourage the child? Perhaps by being too harsh? Perhaps by belittling the child? Perhaps by giving the child little praise or encouragement. Perhaps by having double standards?

So the father is addressed specifically. Take care and do not embitter and exasperate your children. The mother by nature will probably try to 'smooth things over' whereas fathers may not. But it's as if Paul reminds the Christian father to remember their Father in heaven. Remember how your heavenly Father treats you. Remember his patience with you. Remember his kindness and tenderness. Remember his unfailing love. For how the earthly father treats his child will influence how that child will understand the Fatherhood of God.

It's been said that families are the cradles of society. It's also true that the earthly nature is often seen most clearly behind closed doors. But in Christ we have been given a new life. And that new life will affect and enrich all other relationships. It begins with the way we relate to God. But it also affects the relationship between husbands and wives and then between the parents and their children. The beautiful garden or holy life that we thought about last time must be beautiful inside the home. Holy lives make happy families, to the glory of God.