

Relationships in and out of the Church

A study of Colossians 3:18–4:18

By Mike Morrison

In the last part of his epistle to the believers in Colosse, Paul describes the kind of conduct that is appropriate for people whose lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). This is how Christ lives in his people in first-century Asia Minor.

Christian households

Paul includes brief comments for Christian marriages: **Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them** (3:18-19). Paul’s advice for women is typical for that time and culture, but his advice for husbands is unusual: It calls the men to self-sacrifice and puts limits on their authority.

Greek philosophers sometimes gave similar comments for wives, children and slaves—these are called “household codes.” The husband, father, and master were usually the same person; Paul gives instructions for him according to these three roles.

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Paul’s next set of instructions is also brief: **Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged** (3:20–21). Paul addresses the children as morally responsible people who care about their relationship with the Lord. Fathers, who had primary responsibility for discipline, are warned to be careful in their role, and to consider the emotions of their children.

Paul’s advice for slaves is much more extensive: **Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord** (3:22).

Paul does not really mean “in everything.” If the masters told the slaves to stop believing in Christ, Paul would not want them to obey! He is speaking in generalities here, just as he did for wives and chil-

dren. Repeatedly, Paul connects his commands with the Lord. For slaves he says, “with...reverence for the Lord.” Our Master has something to say about the way we function in society.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men (3:23). Slaves should work sincerely, not reluctantly, whether or not the master sees them. Their station in life, although far from ideal, is a way in which they can serve Christ. Paul does not publicly call for an immediate end to slavery—that would only invite persecution for something that was then politically impossible. But his teachings paved the way for eventual abolition.

Although our society is far different, the advice Paul gives here is often relevant to modern employment. Even if we feel trapped in an unpleasant job, we should be a good worker, because we are servants of Christ. But we show him no disloyalty if we look for a better job.

Reliable workers are often rewarded in this life, but there is an even more significant reward for Christians: **since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving** (3:24). In the Roman Empire, slaves could not inherit anything. But in Christ’s kingdom, they do. We belong to him, work for him, and are rewarded by him.

Paul next says, **Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism** (3:25). Paul is apparently referring to the rewards (or penalties) of the final judgment. Misconduct will be viewed negatively—and this applies to slave masters as well as slaves.

Paul addresses the masters directly: **Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven** (4:1). Masters should realize that they are slaves of Christ, and this should affect the way they treat their slaves. They should conform to what is right and fair. In time, Christians would ask whether slavery itself



was fair—and when they had the freedom to campaign against it, they led the way in eliminating this immoral practice.

Good words for everyone

Paul now begins to address everyone: **Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should** (4:2-4). Prayer should be a consistent part of our lives, and we should be watchful, or alert.

Paul does not ask that his prison cell be opened, but that the door might open for the gospel, and that the message might be clear, so people know what they are being asked to accept. Paul has years of experience in preaching the gospel, but he still asks for God's help. He may also be hoping that the Colossians apply these ideas to themselves—that opportunities might arise for *them* to relay the message, and that they do it clearly.

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity (4:5). One element of wisdom is knowing that our conduct with others may affect their attitude to the gospel. If we are selfish, opinionated and judgmental, our neighbors may find our message a bit hard to believe.

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (4:6). If our words are gracious, they will make the gospel more attractive, more likely to be accepted.

Exchange of greetings

Ancient Greek letters often closed with an exchange of greetings, and Paul follows this custom, though he mentions many more friends than most letter-writers did: **Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord** (4:7). Tychicus is probably the one who carried the letter to Colosse.

I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here (4:8-9). Paul says three times that these messengers will bring news of Paul's circumstances—this hints at something important. Perhaps they will give details that Paul did not want to put in writing lest they be intercepted or censored.

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (4:10). Paul once objected to Mark (Acts 15:37-38), but he is on good terms with him now: **(You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)**

Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me (4:11).

Paul saves his longest comments for Epaphras, the person who started the church in Colosse (1:7): **Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis** (4:12-13).

Epaphras had a special fondness for these people, and Paul could hear his concerns and felt that it would be helpful to tell the Colossians what Epaphras wanted for them: steadfastness, maturity, and confidence.

Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings (4:14). Luke is the author of a Gospel and the book of Acts. Paul says nothing about Demas here; we learn from 2 Tim. 4:10 that he eventually deserted Paul.

Paul then greets people in and near Colosse: **Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house** (4:15). Nympha's church may have been nearby, in Hierapolis.

Paul tells them to exchange letters: **After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea** (4:16).

Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord" (4:17). Archippus was part of the church that met in the home of Philemon (Phm. 2). We do not know what "work" he was doing, but Paul encouraged him and affirmed its importance.

Letters were normally penned by scribes who had experience in writing on papyrus, but the real authors often signed the letter themselves. So Paul takes the pen and writes, **I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you** (4:18). Grace is central to the Christian life, and Paul ends most of his letters on a note of grace. ●

Questions for discussion

- How do some parents embitter their children? (3:21)
- What options did first-century slaves have when masters commanded them to do something immoral? (3:22)
- How might trade unions and corporations make it difficult to apply verse 22 in the modern world?
- How can good behavior help me answer people's questions? (4:6)
- Am I wrestling in prayer for someone? (4:12)