



Relationships

Colossians 3:18-4:1

One in Christ

- ❑ True Christians are united in Christ (*Colossians 3:11*). Regardless of ethnicity, social status, or gender, divisions and wrongful attitudes of superiority or inferiority are not acceptable.
 - 📖 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3:28, NIV*).
- ❑ However, there are still distinctions among people. For example, God has established structures, and has assigned different people different roles in these structures. Nonetheless, regardless of position or role, Christians should treat one another according to the principles in Colossians 3.
- ❑ After giving instructions concerning relationships within the Christian community (3:12-17), Paul gives instructions concerning relationships within the family. Read Colossians 3:18-21.

Wives & Husbands

- ❑ In verses 18-19, Paul addresses wives and husbands concerning the marriage relationship.¹
- ❑ Verse 18 says, “Wives, submit² to your husbands”. Christians in general are to submit to one another (*Ephesians 5:21*).³ However, in this context, the wife’s submission to the husband is based on the God-established structure for the family. The husband is to be the leader.⁴
- ❑ Verse 19 says, “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh⁵ with them”. Husbands are to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (*Ephesians 5:25*). This kind of love is a self-giving love (personal and sacrificial).

1. What kind of marriage relationships have you experienced or observed? How do they compare to the teaching of these verses? In attempting to apply these verses, what are some of the difficulties or problems?
2. For husbands and wives to obey these instructions, what is needed?⁶



¹ See the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:22-33 for a more extensive teaching. Also see “The Marriage Relationship” and “What about Marriage?” on the ICF website.

² “submit” (*hypotassō*, from “order” [*tassō*] “under” [*hypo*]). In this context, it refers to a voluntary yielding in love.

³ Ephesians 5:21 says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”. This general principle is consistent with Christian attitudes of love and humility (e.g., Philippians 2:3-4).

⁴ Ephesians 5:22-23 says, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church”. In this verse, “head” (*kephalē*) refers to one who has authority and is the leader. Some people claim this authority structure was culturally bound and thus does not necessarily apply to all cultures and times. However, according to Paul, the basis of man’s headship is the order of creation (Genesis 2:7, 18, 22-24; 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-9, 11-12). Since the headship of the man is God’s original design, it applies to all times and cultures.

⁵ “do not be harsh” - the husband’s leadership should not be negative, oppressive, or reactionary. Paul has already instructed Christians to “put off” anger and “put on” compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness (Colossians 3:12-13). This is how Christian men should treat everyone, especially their own wives!

⁶ What is needed? Self-giving, sacrificial, unconditional love, and submission to the best interests of others. Of course, we tend to be self-centered, so putting others before ourselves is difficult! Actually, it is impossible to obey the Bible’s instructions apart from the grace of God. However, if we have received Christ through faith, we are new creations, and the Holy Spirit lives in us, changes us, and empowers us. Only as we put off the old, and rely on the power of God to transform us, will we be able to love the way God wants us to love in a marriage relationship.

Children & Parents

- ❑ Verse 20 says, “Children, obey your parents in everything”.⁷ Verse 21 says, “Fathers,⁸ do not embitter⁹ your children, or they will become discouraged”. Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (NIV).
3. In what ways might parents “embitter” their children?¹⁰ In what ways can parents “bring [their children] up in the training and instruction of the Lord”?¹¹



Slaves & Masters

- ❑ In verse 22, Paul addresses “slaves”, who were also members of the household. Unlike the family structure, slavery was established by humans, not God. In his letters, Paul neither approves slavery nor encourages revolt (*1 Corinthians 7:17-24*).¹² But he tells both slaves and masters to live according to Christian principles in their relationships with one another.
 - ❑ Read Colossians 3:22-4:1. Because the master/slave relationship is a kind of boss/worker or management/labor relationship, the principles taught in these verses are often applied to modern working relationships.
4. In applying these principles, what are the responsibilities of the worker or employee? What is the proper attitude and motivation?¹³



5. What are the responsibilities of the employer or boss? What motivation is given?

The Primary Relationship

- ❑ The primary relationship is our relationship with the Lord. As Christians, we relate to others as we should because “it is fitting in the Lord” (3:18) and “pleases the Lord” (3:20). We serve others as we should because “it is the Lord Christ [we] are serving” (3:24). If our relationship with the Lord is good, we will be both motivated and empowered to live as we ought to live.

Reflection/Application

- Of the human relationships mentioned in this lesson, which one needs the most improvement in your life? Commit to work on that relationship by God’s grace. Seek guidance, resources, help and encouragement. Keep in mind “the primary relationship”. What do you need to do?

⁷ “children” (*tekna*) – may refer to children growing up, but could include any children still living in the home. “obey your parents in everything” – that is, unless obeying parents means disobeying God.

⁸ “fathers” (*pateres*) – this verse also applies to mothers; but as family leaders, fathers have a special responsibility.

⁹ “embitter” (*erethizō*) – to provoke to resentment or bitterness. Ephesians 6:4 (NIV) uses “exasperate” (*parorgazō*), which means to provoke to anger (as translated in ESV and NASB).

¹⁰ By inconsistent or hypocritical discipline; making unreasonable or endless petty demands; nagging; lack of positive reinforcement; “authoritarian parenting” (overstrictness, controlling, criticizing). The other extreme is “permissive parenting”, resulting in children who lack self-discipline. The proper balance is “firm but kindly”.

¹¹ We train and instruct our children through regular Bible teaching and application (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9), Bible-based materials of various sorts, prayer, encouragement and loving nurture, discipline and correction, fellowship with other believers, service opportunities, and especially through our own lives and example.

¹² While revolt against slavery was not explicitly encouraged by the apostles, the liberating and life-changing truth of the gospel would eventually overcome it.

¹³ The Christian worker works for the Lord, not merely for human authorities. Even if we are not treated well or paid well in our earthly positions, the Lord sees and knows our hearts, and the “big payday” is at the end of this life. God will reward the faithful, and repay the wrong, for both the worker and the earthly master.