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15 July 2020

The Dynamics of Godly Relationships

Colossians 3 v 18 - 4 v 1

Introduction

Sometimes a word becomes popular in the media. You hear it once and suddenly it's everywhere. Last year, after the election, it was "prorogue". None of us had ever heard it before and no one knew what it meant but it was in every news report for weeks.

With coronavirus on the rampage and ever-changing rules coming from the government, one of the words we hear over and over again is "household". "Don't get closer than 6 feet to anyone who isn't in your household". "If you display symptoms your household needs to isolate". "You can now get together with another household and form a bubble". Maybe it's because it's easy to define. Family is a hard one. Do you include grandparents? Kids away from home? Aunt Mary if she lives just down the road? No, households are much easier. It's the people living in your house.

And it's appropriate for tonight's passage. Here we have Paul's instructions for building Godly relationships in the household.

Background to Colossians So Far

We've been working our way through Colossians, Paul's letter to this town in what is now Turkey. And Paul wants to encourage, correct and guide them. So far he has:

1. Explained that Christ is first in everything. The fullness of God dwells in him and the Colossian believers have been made alive in him.
2. Because of this he says, don't fall prey to legalism or mysticism. You are no longer under the law so following rules and regulations doesn't help you. And seeking mystical revelations is pointless: the gospel is open, clear and universal.
3. After assuring them of their security in Christ he urges them to live in the reality of that. He says to set your mind on Christ, put off the old self and put on the new one.
4. And in our reading tonight Paul concentrates on living for Christ in the household setting.

What Does a Holy Life Look Like?

So what does a holy life look like? Walking about with your head in the clouds, travelling barefoot on pilgrimages to holy places? Hiding away in a monastery, avoiding contact with the sinful world? No, the spiritual walk is very much more down to earth. It is lived by ordinary people, living in ordinary circumstances, but by supernatural power. There is no call to leave jobs, family, friends. Paul wants these people to live for Christ right where they are.

First Century Households

Colossae is a town in a Roman province. It had been an important town in the area so had been affected in its architecture and lifestyle by the nations that have had control at various times. The Persians had passed through, and then the Greeks. The Romans had taken over and there was also a fairly large contingent of Jews.

Roman households tended to follow a pattern:

- The head of the household was the “Paterfamilias”: father of the family - he had absolute rule over the house - even to the extent that, theoretically at least, he could lawfully punish and even kill anyone of the household. Any children were under his authority, even when grown, until they left the house.
- The wife like the rest of the family was subject to the head, and was expected to run household affairs, organise the children and servants, and generally keep things running.
- Sons inherited the family wealth so the family didn’t want too many, or the inheritance would be split into too many small pieces. However life was often short so households changed quickly.
- And slaves were often owned, to cook, clean, guard and serve the family. These were commonly the defeated soldiers of an enemy, or born into slavery or people who had fallen into poverty and couldn’t support themselves.

As Christianity swept into this town we find nobles, commoners and slaves suddenly grouped together as brothers and sisters in Christ. They meet together and break bread as equals in God’s eye (look at v11 - **Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised...**).

These are the people Paul is writing to. So how do they interact in society? Should they restructure the way they live now that they are Christians?

Paul doesn’t suggest this. Instead he requires them to live changed lives within the framework they find themselves.

Dos and Don’ts

Note that Paul is targeting some areas he feels need help. This isn’t an exhaustive list of rules. In fact rules have been thrown out the window, remember. He has already warned them not to fall back into trying to obey lots of rules and regulations. Rather he wants their lives to be a witness to God’s holiness and love. Look at verse 17:

V17 - And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the context in which Paul wants them to think about their behaviour. The whole section on household living should be taken as examples of doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, and giving thanks at every turn.

Also notice that relationships are very much a two-sided thing - there is a part to play on both sides, and Paul brings out pairs of relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, and servants and masters. He starts each with the subservient role, but in each case he then has instruction for the dominant role and it's never to assert that dominance, but instead to be considerate and caring.

Let's look at these three relationship pairs, then...

1. Husband and wife

V18-19 - Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

The Greek word for "submit" here is a military term, meaning ranked under. It isn't a statement of fact but a request. Paul is saying that wives should rank themselves under their husbands, put themselves under their authority. However it doesn't mean total obedience. It should be done "as is fitting in the Lord". That means evaluating what the husband asks and obeying when it is right and fitting.

If we look in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus we find the same command, and he elaborates on the reason for this submission. The marriage relationship is a picture of Christ and the church, which willingly puts itself under his authority as its head. Of course not many husbands are as perfect as the Lord, so Paul adds his "as is fitting" qualifier.

Now, husbands, notice that you are not being asked to make sure your wife does what you say. Instead husbands are instructed to love their wives, and not be harsh with them. In Ephesians Paul says to love your wife as Christ loves the church, giving himself for her. That's quite an example to live up to! He continues by saying to love your wife as you love your own body. That means doing what is best for her and what will please her.

Did you notice, too, that Paul tells husbands to love their wives? It's a call to action. Love here isn't a feeling. It's not about attraction, infatuation. How many marriages have ended because one partner "doesn't love" the other any more. If you are in any normal marriage there will be times when you don't feel that attraction, that fuzzy warm feeling. And those are the times when we must heed Paul's command. Husbands, love your wives. Especially when you don't feel like it. Put her before yourself when you really just want to do your thing. Wives, submit to your husband even when you're tired. Those are the times when relationships are strengthened.

These aren't easy things to do. It's not easy to put yourself under someone else's authority. Nor is it easy to put someone else's good before your own. But in doing them we are a witness

to the world, a living picture of that relationship between Christ and the church. And remember verse 17. Wives be thankful for your husband. Husbands be thankful for your wife.

2. Parent and child

V20-21 - Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Here the command is obedience rather than submission. The child is not asked to think about and assess what their parent is asking, but to obey, trusting that the parent has wisdom and is doing what is best for them. The word means to “listen under”, to attend to your parent and then obey. The motivation for obedience is to please God. Notice that this gives full Christian status to child believers.

Parents are to avoid provoking their children as it might result in discouraging them. It's very easy in a moment of tiredness or stress to snap at a child. As parents we might think that we are in charge and in control. But our job is to nurture and encourage our children that they might thrive. Not to crush them. We often think of the stereotypical teenager as moody, unresponsive, seemingly uninterested. And partly that's just what teenagers are like. But what if some of that lack of interest is discouragement from the times we have shouted at them, called them stupid or lazy, or disregarded their opinions. I'm not saying that we don't need to discipline our children, but discipline should always come from a loving concern for their growth.

And remember, we are to be thankful. Children be thankful for your parents. Parents be thankful for your children.

3. Master and Slave

V22-24, ch 4 V 1 - Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Here is where we might ask why the bible doesn't condemn slavery. It is different here than in most modern-day cases, where people are ripped from their homes and sold into slavery, but it is still ownership.

Why does Paul not call for change? Ending slavery would benefit society, but Paul's eyes were on the eternal status - and living for Christ while a slave is a better witness than gaining freedom.

Jesus was confronted with similar questions - when he was asked whether to pay taxes to the Romans or not he pointed out Caesar's head on a coin and said "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's". But then he diverted the discussion to spiritual matters and said "Give to God what is God's". Many of Jesus' followers thought that he had come to free them from the Romans. But that wasn't why he had come. The Son of God had come to free them from their sin.

We can't really directly apply the commands here as we don't have slaves among us or even servants, but we do have employees and employers, or workers and managers, and the principles apply to them too. Paul calls for the worker to do their absolute best, as if they're working for the Lord. And not just when they're being watched but just as much when they're out of sight.

When the coronavirus hit our country many office-based workers were asked to work from home, me among them. I'm sure there was a fear that they wouldn't work as hard or as many hours when they weren't being observed, and perhaps that is true in some cases. But as believers we are working for God as well as our bosses, and he always sees us. So our work should be diligent, and even cheerful.

Likewise masters, employers, managers, are called to be fair and just in the way they treat their staff. No matter how high up they are in their company, they are still under a higher master, and he is the one who brings judgement.

These patterns of work, patterns of living will be observed by others, whether we know it or not, and Paul wants our lives to be witnesses for Christ in us.

And once again, remember to be thankful. Workers be thankful for your boss, managers be thankful for your workers.

Conclusion

So, how is your home life? When you're not at church showing your good side, what are your relationships with family like? What are your relationships at work like? Are you a diligent worker? Are you a fair boss?

Will those who see you from Monday to Friday testify to Christ working in you? Will they recognise you as a Christian? Or are you someone who acts religious at the weekend, but doesn't follow through with their daily walk? Do you get angry with your spouse or your children?

I can't ask you without asking myself. I'm a husband. What does my wife think of how I have shown her love? I'm a father. How encouraging does my daughter think I am? I'm an employee currently working from home. How diligent does my manager think I am? How many tea breaks am I really having compared to what he thinks?

God wants us to live out our salvation in our everyday lives, that we might glorify him.

And, in all these relationships I must give thanks to God.