

MASTER OF THE HOME

by Steve Zeisler

It has been often observed that timing is everything.

In the course of our study in the book of Colossians, we have come to chapter 3, verse 18: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." That raises a subject that needs careful attention and sensitivity at any time, but it seems to me that it is particularly interesting to be dealing with this subject this week. The vice president of the United States is engaged in a public debate with a fictitious television personality, newscaster Murphy Brown, over the roles of parents and of men and women in relation to one another.

There is a New Age channeler in the state of Washington named J.Z. Knight who is being divorced by her fifth husband. This channeler purports to speak with the voice of an ancient warrior, Ramtha from the lost continent of Atlantis, who periodically inhabits her, gives predictions, and puts on shows. Knight's husband claims that Ramtha browbeat him and made his life miserable, and that this trauma should figure in their divorce settlement. It's more evidence that we live in a world that is crazy and has lost its way, especially with regard to the relationship between men and women.

Further, in the sports world the NHL had a woman goalie playing professional hockey for the first time. Jimmy Connors and Martina Navratilova played a professional tennis match against each other. And finally, admirals in the navy were fired for being unable to bring relationships between men and women in the Navy into any kind of reasonable boundaries. This is the year of the woman as we've often been told. Men's movements are surfacing everywhere, trying to make sane what has become insane in this culture: men trying to be in right relationship with women.

ABIDING WISDOM

And as timing would have it, this week we have come to one of the places in Scripture where we can get some help on this subject. The ancient and abiding wisdom of God will do us much good in the day and age we live in. Husbands and wives, parents and children (also in the news this week was a twelve-year-old divorcing his parents), and other household relationships are the subject of our study this morning.

I must say that this subject is difficult to preach on because many of our contemporaries, Christian and non-Christian, have become consumed with issues of feminism, and reaction to feminism. There are probably people in this room who have read every book that has been written on the subject of what the Bible teaches about maleness and femaleness. On the other hand, there are people, new to the faith, who are totally unaware that the Bible even comments on the subject. And of course, in the middle is a group of people who have received the teaching of the Bible on family relationships without difficulty or special attention. So we are a community of people who will come at this material from very different points of view, and that will add to the adventure of our study. I invite you to join me on this adventure as we begin by reading Colossians 3:18-4:1:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart. Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing

that you too have a Master in heaven.

The book of Colossians has been making a case for the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all else. Having captivated us by his love, he becomes the Lord of our lives. We put off the old nature and put on the new nature; we are becoming obedient from the inside out to the truth of the gospel. It is important to notice that what we have in this section is insight into how Christian households can practically apply this truth to which they are already committed.

HOUSEHOLD CONCERNS

Let me make some observations by way of introduction to this text. First, this section is a series of pairs. In each case one member of the pair is addressed and then the other: wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters, and these pairs are intended to be studied together. It is inappropriate to speak of the responsibility of a wife, for instance, without the responsibility of her husband, and vice versa.

Slaves and masters are considered in this passage. One might think the association of wives and children with slaves implies that wives and children were to be thought of as chattel also. But that is not the analogy. The reason they are associated with one another in this unit is that slaves were considered part of the household, and this is a section that is dealing with household relationships.

This passage is not particularly long in Colossians (there is a longer version of these things in Ephesians). This relatively short section is followed immediately by a section that has to do with evangelism and then by one that gives personal greetings and encouragement for individual saints. All of that makes the point here that we can become over-focused on family relationships. It is a particular concern for modern Christians that at times we delve as deeply as we do into the inner workings of family, feeling that our families are threatened by external forces. At times we can think that God is concerned only about our families, their inner workings, and so on. It is true that he is concerned about them, but he also wants us to be aware of the non-Christian world around us and their needs, as well as a great many other things. So we need to put this in the context of what follows it.

IN JESUS NAME

Lastly, these verses need to be put in the context of what precedes them. Verse 17 says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." There is an assumption in the mind of the apostle Paul when he writes commands like, "Wives, be subject to your husbands," "Husbands, love your wives," "Children, be obedient to your parents," "Fathers, do not exasperate your children," and so on. It is that the people who hear these words and are going to obey them have already agreed with him in their heart of hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord. They long to do what is right and what honors the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in their actions, thoughts, choices, and feelings.

I stress this because there are homes which have significant areas of resistance to the Lord; destructive, abusive behavior. An example that comes most immediately to mind is a child who is being severely abused by a parent. The arrangements for harmony in the home that begin in Colossians 3:18 are not the needed word from the Lord in such a case. What must come first is the command given in Colossians 3:8 - "put aside" abusive speech etc. Homes in which the gospel message has been allowed to produce a degree of emotional health are ready for the directives given in the passage we are considering here.

A person with a malignant tumor doesn't give first attention to questions of diet and exercise. It's very important to eat nutritiously and exercise regularly in order to stay healthy. But if you have a cancer inside, the first order of business is to remove it; then when ordinary health is restored, you find information about diet and exercise useful. The sad fact is that there are Christian homes with patterns of behavior, spiritual cancers, that are an affront to Christ. These directives to submission and obedience (obey your parents" must not be used to buttress evil behavior.

On this same point, we must recognize the important role played by the Christian community. We live in a world in which families are often isolated from each other. Seldom do children, parents, and grandparents live close together. And, our Christian family may be spread over a wide area. We live with enough geographical and emotional isolation from each other that it is possible for pockets of abuse to exist that no one knows about. So it's important to recognize that the verses immediately preceding Colossians 3:18 talk about loving one another, being patient with one another, teaching one another, and admonishing or counseling one another. This section has in mind a community of people that cares about its members so that when there are families in difficulty, they will be discovered and ministered to, patiently cared about, and restored to health. We must work hard to overcome the distance between us as members of Christ's family.

WIVES AND HUSBANDS

With all that background, now let's look at the first pair of statements in verses 18-19: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be embittered against them." In the Scriptures, marriage is described first in Genesis: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave [be united] to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." The best way to describe marriage is that it is a new oneness created by God. And in order for that oneness to stay healthy, it has to avoid dual problems. To borrow terms from popular physics, it has to avoid the problem of centripetal force and the problem of centrifugal force. That is, in order for the oneness to be stable, it needs to avoid collapsing inward, becoming so buried in itself that it implodes, if you will. And it needs to avoid the exploding apart; being destroyed by distance and isolation. That's what the apostle is on to in speaking to husbands and wives here.

The command to be submissive is not given only to wives. Ephesians 5:21 says that we are all to be subject to one another; everybody in the Christian community is to give way to others, husbands and wives alike. Nor is the command to love given only to husbands. Remember, Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." That applies to everybody. But because of the way God created women and because of the characteristic issues that will occur from the wife's side of the relationship it is useful to say to wives, "Be subject to your husbands." And for the same reason it is useful to say to husbands, "Love your wives."

Men and women have always been understood to be different from one another in the records of every culture. Modern feminism has given up earlier efforts to deny essential differences. However, the language used to differentiate must be chosen carefully. When Leslie and I were planning to get married (20 years ago) we were given literature which taught that men were logical and women were emotional. More frequently today you will hear the word nurture used; women, we're told (even in the secular world), are more naturally nurturing than men. In fact, one of the arguments that is being used in California for electing two women senators from this state in November is that they will do a better job of representing the people of California in the federal government because of their natural nurturing capacity. They are (they claim) more inclined toward the needs of children, health-care, and so forth.

NURTURING WITH LIMITS

The desire to bring life, security, and intimacy in families is all part of the nurturing process. Paul's calling here could easily be stated in such terms. The danger that will grow from that capacity to nurture is not knowing when to quit. The inclination to provide security will continue to expand. But when is the family secure enough? When has the listening gone on long enough, and when have I really drawn out everyone's feelings on every subject? Are all the family members well represented? Have we created enough good will? And on and on. You hear people joke, for instance, that the last thing in the world you want to do is come between a mother bear and her cubs, because even in the animal kingdom the nurturing role of the female adult makes all other considerations vanish. These verses recognize that something similar operates in our families. Too much nurturing can be a disadvantage. The family becomes too consumed with itself; it falls in on itself and becomes too entangled.

What is needed is for someone to say, "Our family is secure enough now. We can turn and attend to other things. We exist to serve God in a wider world. We have other responsibilities to pay attention to, and things to do in the greater community." So for a wife to be subject to her godly husband will help set limits on the

nurturing process, and that is of great value to her.

Men, on the other hand, need to be told to love their wives. Their tendency is to move too quickly from family needs to the wider world. They often don't listen long enough, or close off discussion too quickly. So the call of Scripture to them is to love their wives. Paul adds in Ephesians, "...as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." What men are directed to do against their characteristic weakness is listen, care, communicate, and not come to answers too quickly. They need to understand why their wives think as they do and to give weight to their opinions.

So husbands are called to love actively, giving up their lives for their beloved. Wives are called to let the husband lead and set limits to the nurturing process. Each of them, because God made them that way, needs the other, and the marriage is made healthier. The unit is stable; it doesn't fly apart nor does it fall in on itself.

Leslie and I were helping our daughter recently in an athletic setting. Because of illness and a difficult coach she was physically and emotionally depleted. Leslie's response was to care, cry, hug and reinforce our love and approval. And if she had been there by herself, her advice probably would have been, "Well, quit the stupid team! You don't need this..." -- to make the hurt go away. On the other hand, I was not as good at communicating understanding, support, and tenderness. But my role in that setting was to say, "Think about what it's going to cost you if you quit. Do you really want to do that? Is that where you want to be a month or six months from now? Think about the issues that are outside the immediate situation, and we'll support you in whatever you decide." I was trying to set some limits on the nurturing process. Eventually it ended up being very useful for Sarah that both parents were in the room. Both contributions were important in caring for her.

AVOID IMPATIENCE

Paul modified his call for husbands to love their wives by adding that they are not to be embittered against them. Impatience is frequently the source of anger and bitter feelings. "Doggone it, I want a solution! Let's get on with it. This love business takes forever." Love keeps men connected longer than they naturally want to be, and the typical response of men is to get impatient. But that's exactly what we are forbidden to do. We must not start tapping our feet, growling, and getting tired of the process. We must live with the process. And similarly, Paul modifies his directive to wives by adding that it is fitting in the Lord that they have limits set on them by submitting to their husbands. Jesus' sacrificial love for us and joyful submission to his Father are models for both husband and wife.

Let's consider some definitions. The command to love is *agapao* in Greek; it has to do with self-sacrifice. It is not, of course, erotic love, which involves physical and emotional feelings. Nor is it brotherly love, another word Paul might have used. He is talking about the love that gives up its rights, lays down its life, and places another before oneself. It is the love of Jesus on the cross. Husbands are to love their wives in that way.

The word to be subject (or to submit) is also interesting. It's the word *hupotasso* in Greek. It means to give way to someone else. The best picture I have mentally of that is seating arrangements in a car. Our kids will say occasionally, "I want to ride shotgun!" meaning they want to sit in the front seat next to the driver. Those who become a driver's companion are not the driver. They have submitted to the decisions of another. But they're not in the trunk either! They have a lot to say about where the car is going to end up. That is what Paul is getting at in saying, "Wives, be subject to your husbands." It is being willing to ride shotgun.

Wives are never called on to obey their husbands. The word is submit. You can be forced to obey someone you hate or feel no respect for submission is freely offered - it implies persuasion. It must be both inward and outward.

THREE DIFFERENT MODELS

Now let me ask you to use your imagination and think of marriage in three very different cultures. The gospel enters all three of these cultures. People receive the Lord and want to obey him. They have Colossians 3 translated into their language and they want to follow it, but it's going to look very different in each case. It's very important for us to remember that ours is not the only culture that has ever existed. The wisdom of

Scripture is universally applicable. It will benefit us to think in terms of what these issues would look like in different cultures. And we might see ourselves in a helpful light as a result.

Imagine first a tribal culture that knows almost nothing of civilization and lives in very difficult circumstances. It is a hand-to-mouth existence, where survival is the key issue before people. Secondly, let's imagine traditional, civilized cultures in which men and women have very different spheres. Men travel the world and read the books, and they have the interesting conversations. Women usually have a smaller setting; they're less educated. They are at home with responsibilities that involve children and household. The third culture that we can imagine is the modern western nineties, the world we live in. These three are very different from each other, and yet the word of God, as we have been considering it this morning, applies usefully to each one.

In the tribal culture, there is almost no freedom of movement, time, or energy to have much debate. The husband and wife get up in the morning, and there are a thousand chores to do. They work hard until sunset, go to sleep, get up the next morning, and do the same thing. The relationship between them in that kind of setting would be typically less emotional than we're used to. It's an economic unit. "You have your duties and I have mine. Yet now that they're Christians they hear the words, "Husbands, love your wives," and, "Wives, submit to your husbands." And for the first time the husband, thinking these thoughts, hearing the word of the cross and how Christ loved him, starts to think about his wife and wonder what it's like to be who she is. There is very little room to change anything, but perhaps he values her differently than he did before and has hopes and concerns for her. And she begins to realize that her husband is a gift from God, and she actively begins to expect from him some encouragement, limits, protection, and so on. A new depth of spiritual and emotional intimacy is begun.

In the second model where men and women are separate from one another, a different dynamic is at work. The wife is told to be subject to her husband. Imbalances of power and opportunity create dependency by circumstance (not submission by choice). But what often happens in such relationships is that women become manipulative. Unable to play on an equal playing field or speak as equals to their husbands, they learn to manipulate, weave webs of emotional sophistication, and gain power in the relationship that way. The truth of Colossians comes into this setting of unequal power. The wife begins to reject manipulation and expect blessing from the leadership of her husband. The husband begins to actively love his wife and to discover her gifts and desires. He opens doors for her to develop and enjoy all the potential God has placed within her. He does what he can for love's sake to equalize the relationship between them, to offer her more, to lay down his life for her.

The third marriage we're going to look at is a modern marriage. In our time and place most marriages are characterized by equality of opportunity. The wife may have traveled as widely as the husband and had as much education as he. She may have a job as prestigious as his and may have as much authority in her work as he does. She may belong to the same number of professional societies and serve on the same number of boards as he does. So what do the commands, "Wives, be subject to your husbands," and, "Husbands, love your wives," look like in this setting?

'Submission' and 'love' take place in conversations between equals. The husband will not give directives as the boss. That could happen in the unequal marriage, but in one that is largely characterized by equality of opportunity, the husband, because he loves his wife, will persuade her, talk to her, listen to her, involve himself, expect her contribution to be valuable, and in loving conversation with her attempt to make good decisions. And the wife will experience submission in loving conversation with her husband. She will expect that his point of view, putting limits on what she would do otherwise, forcing her out of her comfort zone, will be of benefit.

God's word has life giving insight for every culture. Very little detail is given in Colossians 3:18-19 because the calls to love and to submit apply in any setting. They are always pertinent.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

There are two other relationships in this section, but you must benefit from thinking about them on your own because time doesn't permit very much discussion here. Parents have authority over their children and masters

over their slaves. But what happens in each of these cases is that the mastery of Jesus Christ supersedes all others.

Children voluntarily learn not to come on too strong and take their freedom in Christ too far. And fathers learn to listen long enough to their children so that they're not going to be an exasperation. They need to understand what makes their children exasperated. When I think I am being a reasonable dad and giving reasonable orders, and my child is upset, I must consider that I may be doing something wrong. I have to listen to him and figure out why he is upset. If I'm not going to exasperate him I've got to understand him, and that creates relationship again, just as we saw in the command to husbands to love their wives.

The slave finds himself saying, "I want to obey and to please my Lord, so I will work hard whether my boss sees me or not." The master says, "I want to serve my Master, so I will treat my Christian brother who works for me with respect. I will invite him into my house, pray for his children when they are sick, and have him at my table; we'll share communion together and sing Christian songs in church together. I will treat him as my friend and brother." All of a sudden the master-slave relationship becomes Christianized from the inside out; it becomes a relationship of brothers. And whether the revolution takes place abolishing slavery or not, it has been effectively abolished by the way these people treat each other.

A HEAVENLY MASTER

I want to say one last word on slavery. Slavery was not a racial phenomenon in the Roman world. Slaves were usually people who had been defeated militarily. One of the awful things about slavery in this country is that it has left its scar on a particular race. The remnants of racism have done horrible damage and continue to do so. But in this context we're not addressing the issue of racism. In the ancient world slaves were quite likely to be people of the same social status and race as masters. It was just that they had lost the war and had become the slaves.

But rather than call for revolution to overturn the institution of slavery, these verses bring about change from the inside. The whole world ended up changing as a result. The Roman Empire ultimately lost its commitment to slavery because the gospel penetrated farther and farther, and more and more masters and slaves started treating one another as family, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The last point of all this is that we have a heavenly Master. Everything we do in marriage, between parents and children, or in a working environment; and in every conversation we have in whatever setting, we have as Master over us, and we must please him. He will reward us for our service to him. That is the only basis on which life makes sense. Because we have a Master whom we're serving, our attitude ought to be one acting to benefit other people, and being a servant to someone else, whether through love or submission, through leading or following. We do that joyfully because there is One greater than we whom we long to please.

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