

COLOSSIANS 3:18-4:1 | LIVING RELATIONALLY

VERSE 18 - BLUE

In this section, Paul begins a segment on relationships. These are instructions for believers in the body of Christ, given in a very practical way.

Beginning with wives, Paul instructs them to submit to their husbands, "as it is fit in the Lord." The word submit is ὑποτάσσω [hupotasso], meaning "under appointment."

Many take offense at this passage. The concept of women submitting to their husbands has been called "neanderthal" by some in the Christian community. It must be understood that this is not a demeaning position for women. Since the fall, God has given a certain order to society that holds it together. While everything in Scripture speaks of men as the head of the home, there is nothing in Scripture that supports any view of women as inferior.

Note that women are to submit "as it is fit in the Lord." This is an adverbial clause tells **HOW** to submit, not **WHY** to submit.

If a husband insist that his wife submit in a way that is not "fit in the Lord" then she simply should not do it, nor is she required to do so.

VERSE 19 - BLUE

This straightforward instruction to husbands consists of nine words in Greek and ten words in English. It encompasses nearly all the guidance for husbands found in Scripture. Being a husband is not inherently difficult. Husbands are first commanded to love their wives, a topic Paul expands upon in Ephesians 5:25-31, comparing it to Christ's love for the church and a man's love for his own body.

The second directive for husbands is to avoid bitterness towards their wives. Men, who might long for freedom, can sometimes become bitter towards their wives if they feel constrained by necessity or demands. Love can overcome any degree of bitterness, but if it remains a challenge, the husband is simply instructed to eliminate bitterness from his life.

VERSE 20 - BLUE

Next, Paul addresses children, using a term that does not specify an age but almost certainly refers to those living at home. There comes a time when a man leaves his father and mother (Eph. 5:28), making it implausible to argue that children of any age are under this teaching.

While wives are instructed to submit "as it is fit in the Lord" (v. 18), children are instructed to obey "in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord."

Such teaching could be dangerous in a world where some parents are abusive. Paul, like most biblical writers, is very efficient in giving basic instructions without covering every possible contingency. In a biblical society that adheres to the teachings of verses 18-19, the broad directive of verse 20 is never harmful. Instead of criticizing the Bible for calling for obedience when not every parent is worthy of it, our society should criticize the fact that verses 18-19 are almost completely ignored.

VERSE 21 - BLUE

Paul now addresses fathers with the instruction not to provoke their children to anger.

The instruction comes with the assumption that fathers are the heads of their households and bear ultimate responsibility for discipline. When dad's leave discipline to the mom, chaos often ensues.

Father's are not to "provoke" their children, because it leads to discouragement. Children need to know when to fight and when to leave well-enough alone.

When fathers provoke their children, it can lead to discouragement. The word "discouragement" is a translation of the Greek word ἀθυμέω [athumeo], meaning "without fierceness" or "without passion." This implies that Christian parents should foster a certain fierceness or passion within their children, allowing them to reach a boiling point when necessary. In fact, Christian parents should ask why their son got into a fight rather than immediately condemning the action; there may be a justified reason for the altercation. Continual provocation can extinguish a child's passion.

VERSE 22 - BLUE

The final instruction is directed towards servants, and this guidance arguably extends through verse 25 (see note on verse 23). The Greek word translated "servants" is δοῦλος [doulos]. It had a broad range of meanings, with the American experience of slavery representing only a small fraction of its connotations in Roman society. It is estimated that 30-50% of the Roman population would have been considered a DOULOS in some capacity, including roles such as teachers, philosophers, accountants, physicians, as well as various laborers, gladiators, and warriors.

These servants were instructed to obey their earthly masters in all things. While the wording is similar to that given to children, Paul acknowledged that these were masters "according to the flesh," thereby recognizing the intrinsic value of servants as human beings. Servants were encouraged to serve with enthusiasm rather than merely giving the appearance of being busy.

VERSE 23 - BLUE

I think that this command to do everything "heartily, as to the Lord," has to be connected to verse 22 rather than being a separate and general command. The heart of my reasoning lies in verses 24-25, which are clearly connected by grammar to verse 23. If verse 23 is a new thought, huge, almost insurmountable theological issues arise in verses 24-25.

It is important to understand that although this instruction is directed specifically towards servants, it does not mean that we cannot all make this our goal. This guidance is universal in its application, encouraging everyone to work heartily as if serving the Lord. However, it is crucial to maintain the context of these verses to correctly interpret the subsequent instructions in verses 24-25.

VERSE 24 - BLUE

It is the servants who are "knowing" they will "receive the reward of the inheritance" because they "serve the Lord Christ."

A sloppy evangelical would have no problem applying this to believers in the body of Christ. But when these words are considered closely, they are unequivocally works-based.

Most would probably simply take this to be talking about "rewards" rather than salvation, which is a convenient but unconvincing way out of the problem. If taken in any kind of spiritual or heavenly sense, the "reward of the inheritance" doesn't sound like a "bonus for good behavior," but rather like "the very thing you've been promised." As a matter of fact, Matthew 25:34 speaks of the kingdom as the inheritance. So, in evangelical parlance, the kingdom is eternal life/heaven and the inheritance is receiving the kingdom, and therefore receiving the reward of the inheritance is to make it to heaven. And all of this is done by works, not by grace. This is immensely problematic.

Using the word inheritance to mean reward (as in, "bonus for good behavior") is simply to ignore the meaning of words. Inheritance is a legal right, literally the designation of the law.

A seemingly simple way to fix the problem is to say these words are for Israel, and plenty of evidence is given that Israel will receive her inheritance by service to the Lord (i.e., works). The problem with this “solution” is that there is nothing to build the case that this is to Israel. The context gives no justification to limit this to Israel.

So, if the inheritance is not “rewards” and it is not the inheritance of the kingdom for Israel, what is it?

I think the best option is that rather than understanding this as some kind of promised possession, it could be understood as saying that the Lord will make sure that good servants receive what the law (the Roman law) promises to them. Indeed, Roman law did have measures of protection for the *doulos* class.

Slaves who had served their masters well, had a close relationship with them, or possessed valuable skills were more likely to be granted freedom and an inheritance through their master's will. The granting of this freedom was called “*manumissio testamento*.” Some reasons for this practice include:

1. Reward for loyalty: *Manumissio testamento* was often seen as a way to reward slaves who had demonstrated exceptional loyalty, dedication, and service to their masters.
2. Emotional attachment: Some slave owners developed close emotional bonds with their slaves, especially those who worked in their households, and wished to provide for them after their death.
3. Social prestige: Freeing slaves through one's will was sometimes seen as a display of generosity and benevolence, enhancing the slave owner's social standing and reputation.
4. Ensuring continuity: In some cases, slave owners would free skilled slaves and grant them an inheritance to ensure the continuity of their businesses or to provide for the ongoing maintenance of their estates.

I think taking this verse fully in its context of “slave behavior” is both consistent with good hermeneutical principles and resolves the problem of works-based inheritance.

VERSE 25 - BLUE

If understood in a spiritual rather than physical sense, verses 24 and 25 suggest a problematic works-based reward system. Many in Christianity might accept this, but it contradicts the theme of being complete in Christ, which has been emphasized since chapter 1. If Christians are saved from their sins, do those sins come back to haunt them in heaven? If a Christian is to receive punishment in heaven for wrongdoings, does 2 Corinthians 5:19 not contradict this by stating that God does not count their trespasses against them?

It seems most consistent to interpret verses 24 and 25 in the context of servants (as in verse 22) and view both the reward of the inheritance and the wrongs done as referring to earthly rewards and consequences. In this context, Paul is reminding the Colossians of the same principle he shared with the Galatians in Galatians 6:7: God is not mocked; a person reaps what they sow.

Since God shows no favoritism, He will care for a servant just as He will hold a master accountable (which the next verse will address).

VERSE 4:1 - BLUE

In this verse, Paul seems to be speaking of this same “slave inheritance” when he tells Christian “masters” to “give unto your servants that which is just and equal.” This appears to be, at least in part, a reference to the inheritance that the master would choose to give to a faithful servant.

And this gives one additional argument for taking verses 24-25 of chapter 3 in a physical rather than spiritual sense. Paul speaks of husbands, wives, children, servants, and masters all in a physical sense. Why would we take two verses, 24-25, out of their context and make them a spiritual message about rewards in heaven? It seems to me that the context should dictate the interpretation.