

Family Life

Text:

Colossians 3:18 – 4:1

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Slaves, 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 slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”

Introduction:

The first point that needs to be made about this passage is that it is not unrelated to what has preceded. Remember the basic admonition of the book in 2:6: “As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk you in him”. Notice the emphasis on Christ Jesus as Lord; then notice how many times “Lord” is used in the present passage, and the nuances with which it is used. This is never as clear in English translation as it is in the original because the words “lord” and “master” are both translations of the same word. The key word in this text is the word Lord (lord). To feel the full impact we would need to translate with the word “lord” in all seven instances where it appears and distinguish between lords and the Lord, who is for Christians “Lord of lords”, by capitalizing it when it refers to Christ and leaving it lower case when it refers to human masters. The most basic teaching of this passage is that ultimately there is one Lord, and all who have received him as Lord have submitted themselves to his authority and are subject to him in everything that they do. The reason Paul gives for wives to submit to their husbands, “as is fitting in the Lord”, can be applied to everything any Christian does. We exist “in the Lord”, and we must act in a way befitting our position. As we saw in last week’s passage whatever we do should be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Or as he says to slaves in this week’s passage: “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.” This is advice for individuals who have willingly and joyfully submitted to the Lordship of Christ; such people will have no trouble understanding what it means, but those who have not will rebel.

We should also remember that everything in this chapter, including this passage, is posited on its opening sentence: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.” Our new life in Christ is first lived out in the family. Remember in the five point summary we gave of the Christian life the first is: “to know Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and to have new life”, and the last is: “This new life manifests itself especially in the way we relate to others.” We cannot talk about new life in Christ, or the Christian life, and not talk about family relationships. It is in the family first that we must put off anger, wrath, and malice, and put on compassion, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance and forgiveness. It is in the family, where relationships are the nearest and dearest, that God wants to use to teach us and transform us into the image of Christ. If we fail here, it is of little importance what we achieve elsewhere.

Normally, when this passage is treated it is divided according to the various reciprocal responsibilities –wife husband, child parent, slave master, and each one is explained and applied. To do so in the present situation would be too lengthy for the approach we have taken. What I do want to do is to show how new life in Christ transforms family relationships. I will begin by giving a brief historical explanation of the Roman family which is the background of this passage. I will then explain how there are no perfect family structures, and that all family structures need to be transformed by Christ. I will conclude with a case study drawn from the Colossian Church, the case of the slave, Onesimus.

I. Roman Family Life

The first hurdle we have to get over in understanding and applying this passage is the picture of family life that it presents to us. Paul is addressing a Gentile congregation in the 1st century Roman Empire. Their idea of the family and of family life was considerably different from ours. I do not want to bore you with a long historical explanation, but in order to not misunderstand or misapply the text a basic understanding of what the families Paul was addressing looked like is in order.

The first thing to be pointed out is that everyone mentioned in the text including slaves were a part of the family or household. Families included Parents, children, married children and their children, other extended family members and slaves all were under the authority of the *pater familias*. Thus in each case the dominant person (from Latin *dominus*, “lord”) in each pair of reciprocal relationships is the same. The *pater familias* was the wife’s husband, the child’s parent, and the slave’s master, and in each case he had, more or less, absolute authority. For example, if his children displeased him or disobeyed him he could have them tried as criminals or in a worst case scenario put them to death. The family was the basic economic unity and the

father was not only the father of the family; he was also the boss of the family enterprise. I will come back to this, but I think this is enough of a picture for you to grasp that Paul was dealing with something significantly different than what we think of when we refer to our families.

Now in current thought paternalism, which was the foundation of the Roman family and Roman society, is often portrayed as the great evil of society. It is for this reason that the deconstructionists of Western Civilization generally detest the Apostle Paul and accuse him of being a paternalist, a male chauvinist, and even a misogynist. In taking this position they betray their ignorance of the gospel, its transforming power, its historical and cultural influence, and particularly, of Paul's understanding of the power of the gospel to transform human life.

Having said this, we may ask the question: "why doesn't Paul challenge the evil structures of Roman Society?" The answer to this question is the second point of what I want to say.

II. Christ and Culture

The short answer is that he does, but not in the way that a contemporary social engineer would, because his basic analysis of the situation is different. He would say that you change structures by changing people, or in simple terms: rotten people will have rotten families even if we abolish slavery, chauvinism, and paternalism. On the other hand, even within the restrictions of such structures, those who are submitted to Christ and who live by his law of love will have kind, loving, nurturing, and safe families.

While it is true that some human structures are inherently superior to others –democracy to despotism for example; no human structures are exempt from sin, and the best human structures are those that have been most influenced by the gospel. Paul was an evangelist and an apostle, not a social reformer. His primary concern was the transformation of the human heart. Good families, good governments, good societies can only be the fruit of transformed individuals. The reason contemporary social engineering has failed as miserably as it has is that it has omitted sin from its basic equation. It has tried to create a just society out of unjust individuals, a task as impossible as making lemonade out of vinegar. This is the reason that what contemporary society needs is not more social engineering, but spiritual revival. Our spiritual decline will inevitably lead to moral decay and moral decay will lead to social disintegration. This spiritual revival must begin in our families. We must put off the old man and put on the new man and we must do it first with those with whom we share life the most intimately.

Coming back to our text we may observe that as far as family structure goes Paul accepts the *status quo*. His acceptance is limited, however, to the outward structure. The dynamics of the relationships within the structure must now conform, not to the norms of Roman ideals, and if we had time we could go into some of those ideals, but to the new life in Christ. Let me illustrate what I am saying with a case drawn from Colosse.

III. Onesimus

The case I am going to use comes from the family relationship the most foreign to us, the slave, but it fits the context and will illustrate the point. You have probably noticed that in this passage Paul gives his greatest attention to the relationship between master and slave. In the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:28 – 6:9 pride of place goes to husbands. The reason why he emphasizes the slave-master relationship here is because one of the people bringing this letter to the Colossians from Paul is Onesimus, a runaway slave, who had come in contact with Paul in Rome resulting in his conversion to Christ and his service to Paul.

In 4:9 Paul calls him “a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.” That short description speaks volumes. According to the philosophers, and moralists of the Roman Empire slaves were property. They were not even considered human. They were considered incapable of high morality, and punishment was considered the primary means of motivating them. Their master had absolute power over them, even the power of life and death. When they were well cared for it was more for the reasons that one takes good care of his animals than out of human compassion. Such a one as this Paul calls his faithful and beloved brother. Now since Onesimus was useful to Paul it would have been easy for him to encourage Onesimus to remain with him in Rome rather than taking the risk of sending him back to Philemon, his owner, in Colosse. But he does send him back, and he sends him back with a letter to his owner as well as with this letter for the Colossian Church. Here is a part of what he says to Philemon:

“Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you--I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus-- I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother--especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive

me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it--to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Philemon 1:8-25).

This is what Paul means in 3:11 when he said that in Christ there is "neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all." In the new man master and slave have totally transformed meanings. By Roman law Philemon may still be the *pater familias*, and Onesimus may still be his slave, but in Christ they are beloved brothers and must treat one another as such. Now it is true that once that idea begins to take hold, and slaves are seen as dear brothers, and not as property, the very institution of slavery is doomed, but in the meantime the old structure remains, but its inner reality has been totally transformed.

It is also worth noting from this passage how Paul exercises his authority. In his relationship with Philemon he is the superior, the apostle, Philemon a mere Christian. He says that as an apostle he could simply command him to do what he should do, but he doesn't, he appeals to him on the basis of the love of Christ. Try to imagine the loving harmony, deep friendship, and joyful fellowship that came to exist between these three men, an apostle, a *pater familias* and a runaway slave because of the transforming power of the gospel. This is what Christ wants in all of our family relationships. We are never to rule by imposition and constraint, but by love.

All cultures have defined family structure with defined roles for husbands and wives, parents and children. All are in one way or another corrupted by sin and in need of inner transformation. What makes family life good is not that we have an American family, but that we have a Christian family. What every family needs, in whatever culture it exists, and whatever external form it takes is the love of Christ. We who are Christians, who know Christ must not conform to the model of the world, whatever our world is, but we must live out the new life that Christ has given us. When we do our homes will become beacons of hope to the world and refuges of peace and nurture for their inhabitants.