

The Precepts for Christian Roles

Colossians 3:17-4:1


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What Christ did for us through the cross and resurrection are realities. We cannot feel them. We cannot experience them except by believing them by faith. This is the gospel for our Christian life. Paul is driving this home. Now the exhortations move into the sphere of our roles.

We are NOT starting a new topic. All that has gone before is now being extended into roles. The basic principles we have learned do not change. The basic reality and responsibilities do not change. They are being highlighted within role relationships. To separate these paragraphs from the realities and responsibilities that have gone before cuts off the principles and power to believe these commands in an obeying way.

We are building on our gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, sacrificial serving, God-glorifying oneness in Christ.

Explain roles vs relationships.

Basic	Human beings - co-equal image-bearers Christians - connected by the Spirit of God
Roles	Ministry Family Work
	

One writer helps us much as we move into this next section of Colossians:

Notice first, the centrality of Christ, as throughout this sub-section where both 'peace' and 'word' are 'Christ's', when they might equally well have been God's. Absolutely everything that is said and done must be *in the name of the Lord Jesus*. This is the name that unites. We Christians can indeed be one, but only in Christ. The Colossian leaders might therefore set down some such guide for themselves as this: 'All whom Christ has accepted we [p 156](#) will accept; all who are not satisfied with Christ alone will not be satisfied with us.'

Next, notice that 'whatever we do' takes in our *words*, which must include our teaching, as well as our *deeds*, that is our plans, decisions and activities. There is obvious reference here to the previous verses, even if they cannot exhaust so comprehensive a principle. (Lucas, pp. 165-166)

With a Christ-Centered Aspiration (v.17)

The gateway to our text today comes through these words:

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Its Scope

There is nothing we say, do, feel, act... nothing that lies outside the scope of this command. It is one of the most all-encompassing commands in the New Testament. It has the scope and power of loving God and loving neighbor. In fact, it is the New Testament outworking of the two great Commandments.

This is a command. It is not optional. In your living together as God's people and implementing the following responsibilities, you are either obeying or disobeying the Lord.

Its Shape

What does this phrase mean, "Do in the name of Jesus..."? As we have seen, this is first in the context of being together as God's people. Doing everything shaped by the character of the Lord will promote the harmony that pleases Christ. Jesus' name is His character, His word and works. All that we do is to be shaped by who He is and what He has done and what He commands.

Another way to think of this is, "Everything, including what we say and what we do, should be governed by the consideration of what it means to live in the realm of the risen Christ." (Moo, p. 291)

Aiming for the name of the Lord helps prevent the commands from merely being moralism. It will bind each person in their role together in Christ. So when we obey Christ, we are becoming more and more like Him.

Its Attitude

A poise, an attitude, an orientation of the heart to be thankful is an evidence of grace. But gratitude is also a responsibility. We must intentionally choose to be grateful. Gratitude then becomes this environment for obedience. It enables us to bow to God's providence when obedience in our situations is difficult.

In a Christian's Home (v.18-21)

In the context of putting off the old person and putting on the new person and putting on love, Paul writes...

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

The form of these commands were common in the day. The content of them was not. These were part of shaping the new community in Christ. God's people would have lifestyles that are conformed to God's will and lived out in growing wisdom. These commands focus on our responsibilities within our roles. They are from God through His Word. Let's make no mistake. They are not culturally conditioned and therefore cannot be set aside today. Relevance for their day or relevance for our day has nothing to do with these role responsibilities as believers. These will require putting off the old and putting on the new. They will require a submission to God's will. They will require wisdom in the moment living them out.

These all will reflect the roles within the Trinity. We need to stop and think about that.

God is one God, and He is three persons.

God is a community of three, equal persons in eternal relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit.

All of the persons of the Godhead are equal; no person of the Godhead is less equal than any other.

The Son is in eternal submission to the Father doing the Father's will. The Spirit is in submission to the Father and the Son, doing the Father's and therefore, the Son's will.

Submission does not deny equality; it affirms the pattern and image in God.

Submission does not diminish personhood; it spotlights the glory of Christ.

Submission does not the gospel; it highlights the grace of Christ.

Love among the persons of the Godhead flows partially through the channel of submission.

So, we have a Biblical theology of the Trinity which is the foundation and the framework for what follows.

Wives (v.18)

Wives are to submit to their husbands. In a couple of other texts on this topic, it is their "own husbands". Thus, the command here is not to put women in subjection to men generally nor is it some idea of wives are to be subject to men other than their husbands. It is within a very clear and ordered role: as a wife.

It is submission that is commanded. This is not mere obedience nor is it intended to be servile. The submission of Christ to the Father and the submission of the church to Christ are not hard, harsh, servile, grudging. Submission is meant by God as a means to maintain the order of all institutions. This command for wives is in the context of the church submitting to elders, people to government, even to some degree, recognizing and “submitting” to the natural laws of the universe.

We always feel obligated, because of so much abuse by men, to explain submission so that it is almost no longer submission. Sisters, you will know if you are truly submissive only when your husband asks you to do something you don't want to do. Your response to that will demonstrate if you are poised to discuss, appeal, and then, submit. This is true in every sphere. While those in authority ought to respect one's Christian liberty in areas of wisdom, God has still granted final authority in those spheres.

The Bible clearly makes a difference between obedience and submission. Submission is first, an attitude of the heart, a poise to respect and respond to the authority God has given to another. It should lead to obedience, except when obeying is disobeying God's clear commands. Then, submission is obeying God and accepting the consequences. There are many examples in both the Old and New Testaments of this being so. Submission is an attitude toward God and the authorities he has placed you under with a poise to discuss, appeal, and to obey.

There is a qualifying statement, “As is fitting in the Lord.” Normally, “as is fitting” speaks of “as is appropriate.” This is not meant as a limiting scope, but as a motivation. It is fitting, appropriate, just what glorifies God in His will and wisdom.

Dick Lucas summed it up in usual British way:

This is therefore to be thought of, not as the duty of some, but rather of all. Indeed, so far from being an antiquated barrier to the development of mature human relationships, it is part of the divine order within the Blessed Trinity, where Christ who is equal with the Father is forever subject to him. (Lucas, 1980)

Wives, are you submissive to your husbands? Are you poised to respect and respond to them? Do you know how to discuss things, to make appeals? Does your husband sense your desire to do what he asks?

Husbands (v.19)

¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

The reciprocal command is a surprise. While Christian books on marriage and the family talk a lot about husbands leading their homes, the Bible rarely does. Yes, the husband is head of his home just as Christ is head of the church. So, a husband ought to lead his home.

What is commanded here is love for wife. Husbands, you must love your wives. Now, what does the Bible mean when it commands love? Is it primarily commanding an emotion? No, not primarily. It is commanding the affections and “emotions” that accompany Biblical love. But Biblical love is a sacrificial, serving commitment to do good for the person that is the fuel for deep, and unalterable affections.

Husbands, you must not be harsh with your wives. This is first in your words. It is not only in what you say, but also in how you say it. You may not use harsh, cutting, corrosive speech to get your way. You may not force submission by using angry words and harsh speech. If harsh, abusive speech is forbidden, then so are harsh, abusive actions. It also would encompass creating a harsh, unloving environment in the home.

“Do not be harsh” is sometimes translated elsewhere with “do not make bitter.” This should give us pause, men. When we do not live with our waives in the new way of putting on Christ and putting on love, we may be tempting our wives to becoming hard and bitter.

Husbands and wives, these two sets of command are simply the summary of what God expects. Everything commanded in Colossians 1-5 is expected of you, without fail, at home. Go through the imperatives, the commands up to this point. Examine yourselves. How do you interact with one another? Does all that you say and do please God? If not, you need to confess, first to the Lord, and then to one another. Above all, you must forgive as God, in Christ, has forgiven us.

Children (v.20)

Children, please listen. God speaks directly to you in this verse. Listen to what Paul wrote:

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Children, he is speaking to anyone who is still living with their parents. The parallel text in Ephesians seems to be addressing younger children who are still subject to discipline and instruction. However, here, that limitation is not in view. Those of you who are living at home, under your parents authority, unless they have set you free from that authority, you are to obey your parents. Notice the difference between wives and children. Children are not submitting to parents. The obligation is obedience. Children, you must do what your parents say.

This assumes a Christian household where parents are living according to God’s Word. The “in everything” is all inclusive. But it is also limited by what is pleasing to the Lord. If a so-called Christian parent commands their children to do something sinful like stealing, sexual acts, lying to cover for the parents then this should be reported to another Christian, preferably someone in leadership in the church.

One writer suggests that, “Wisdom, rooted in broad biblical principles, will be required to apply the requirement of “obedience in all things” to children in our culture. As long as children are living under the protection of their parents, we would suggest, they are expected to obey their parents.” (Moo, p. 305)

Children, why should you obey your parents? Because this pleases the Lord. This is what the Lord wants. Yes, this will please your parents. That is good reason as well. But you need to learn to live under the Lord, under God and His Word. You need to learn to do what is right because it pleases the Lord. Why? You will not always be living in your parent’s home. You will often have to do what is right, not because your parents have anything to do with it, but because it will please the Lord.

Fathers (v.21)

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

This command is addressed to **fathers**. Commentators want to say that of course, it is addressing to both parents. Except, it is not what the text says. Paul has addressed very specific groups of people in the context. It would be exceedingly strange use fathers when he means parents, particularly when he just used the word for parents in addressing children. So, this command is addressed to fathers. Fathers, remember that with your children, you are to do everything in the name of the Lord. This means that you cannot and must not speak or act with them in a way that provokes them.

What is the danger in disobeying this command? Your children will become discouraged. Our ESV uses the weaker translation of the word here. It could have been translated “embittered.” Once again, do not lift this command out of context. Father’s if you do not put off the sins of the old person you were and put on the virtues of the new person you are becoming, then you are likely to discourage and embitter your children. Your failure to be pleasing to God in doing His will and living wisely will be a provocation of your children. Do you ever wonder why there is no listing of what does embitter or discourage children? That is because we are looking for a list here. But we don’t have it. We don’t have a list of how to love a wife. We don’t have clear examples of how to submit to a husband. Why?

First, the Bible almost never gives us lists of how to. It gives commands that are to be obeyed in the field of wisdom. A list that would have been appropriate in 60 AD in the Roman Empire with a Greco-Roman culture speaking Greek would probably be unhelpful in the modern world. Therefore Paul opened the book with a prayer that we would know God’s will and walk in all manner of wisdom. Then we are to work out the practical obedience in a gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross bearing, God-glorifying way. But we are wanting our Christian life without too much pondering and too much work. We want it handed to us. The result is that we do not work out our

transformation well with the effect that we provoke our children and they become discouraged or embittered.

Second, we have the list or the details in the context. Think of the times, fathers, when you have sinned against your children in all the ways listed in the context. Think of all the times you have not responded to them with the virtues Paul has commended to us?

Fathers, do you have children who are downcast, depressed, discouraged? Are your children embittered against you as parents or against the church? How will you move forward? You will repent and begin living the Christian life in a way that pleases God. You will humble yourself and ask your children's forgiveness.

Fathers of younger children, here is another motivation to live the gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross-bearing, God-glorifying Christian life. God does not require you to produce a certain kind of child. But God does require that you be a God-honoring Christian and therefore a God-honoring parent.

Now we turn from Christian living in the home to Christian living in the work place.

In a Christian's Workplace (v.22-4:1)

The next paragraph presents a challenge. Paul speaks to Christians who are slaves and Christians who are masters. Certainly, these would have been in the church together. It is possible and likely that there were masters and slaves from the same household. It raises the obvious modern, ethical question: why did Paul give commands within the social structure rather than simply telling master's to set their slaves free? Why is slavery simple not addressed? Yet, that is something the Bible in the New Testament does not ever do. It confronts sin and commends virtues yet does not seem to address the institution of slavery. What are we to make of this?

Quite simply and honestly, the Bible, in the New Testament does not condemn slavery. This may be controversial, but it seems if we are going to be honest with what the texts do say, then we need to be careful. What is clear from the texts is that Christians were to treat their slaves in a way that pleased God. The horrible abuses of slaves in just about every culture was wicked and evil. Christian masters are to treat their slaves and servants in a way that pleases God.

We do not live in a culture that permits slavery. We live in a culture where heated emotions make reasonable discussion around any of the history or reality of slavery almost impossible. At least we do not have to settle the issue as a moral imperative today. It is illegal and therefore, immoral.

Now, what do we do with a text like this? Do we just dismiss it as being archaic and irrelevant? No, even in Paul's day there were people who owned businesses and employed other people. What God has done is to take the lowest form of that, masters and slaves, and to command and commend relationships and roles that are to be mapped over work related categories. It functions like this. If this is how

Christian masters and Christian slaves were to behave, then how much more free people who in work environments. So, that is how we will treat this. We will map the language of master and slave to employer and employee, not just to be relevant, but *because I believe this is what Paul expected first century and every century Christians to do.*

This text is poignant because of Philemon and Onesimus. That master and slave are in the church at Colossae. Both of them would hear this letter read. Onesimus would hear these instructions as almost directly to him, as would have Philemon.

Instructions to Those Who are Employed (v.22-25)

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. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

How much more important that we demonstrate, in our work environment, the qualities that were to mark these slaves. The directives here are clear and unmistakable. But they are also challenging. Again, we must not separate these from our gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross-bearing, God-pleasing Christian life. Believing these commands in an obeying way is how the new person we are becoming expresses itself.

One additional point: For students and people whose work is the work of the house, these apply to you too. If you are in school regardless of the level, all of these are applicable to you. If you are someone whose work is keeping the house and the children, these apply to you. Do not limit these to only those jobs where you get paid. That is not the point. How do I know that? Because slaves did not get paid.

Requirements of our Workplace

You must do what you are told to do. In this you are once again to obey wisely. If at all, we must avoid disobeying the clear commands of the New Testament. Obedience to employer still operates practically in wisdom.

You must do the work whether we are being watched or managed or supervised or not. Employers should be able to trust us to do the work. In this era of remote work, this is even more important. If you are working from home, you need to be even more careful about working hard and working without immediate supervision.

You must work hard. Some jobs do not require the hard work envisioned here. But most do. God expects you to work hard at the hard work of your job.

Attitudes in our Workplace

You can fulfill all the requirements and yet have a wrong attitude towards and at work. You can think of your work in the old way rather than in the new way.

You must develop a respect for God and understand His attitude toward work. God Himself works. All through the Bible work is held in high regard. Work is NOT the result of the fall or sin. Work was given to Adam and Eve in the Garden. And throughout eternity we will continue to serve God with work. Ministry is work. Redemption was work. You must develop a Biblical view of work.

Work for Christ on your job. See Him as the master behind your boss. You do work for an employer. But the Lord is your Master. You are ultimately seeking to please Him.

Do not get your identity from your work. You are not, what you do. You live out your identity at work as in all other spheres. What is being commanded here is the outworking of the new you in the workplace.

Expectations from our Workplace

The Lord is good in His grace to offer motivations and incentives for what He requires.

You will receive what you are due from God, even if we do not receive it from work. God will reward you. That reward is sometime financial, but more often it is an increase in the steady progress of your transformation. Imagine how encouraging these words would have been to people who worked hard, were owned by others, and received room and board and clothes for their work. Is the reward God offers you sufficient for you?

God will deal with the injustices you suffer at work. This is at the heart of your willingness to be sinned against, to be wronged and yet you continue to do well. No matter where you suffer injustice, you commit yourself to God who judges justly. Your boss, your teacher, your spouse may sin against you. But you should respond with the self-denying power of a gospel-grounded life. Can we seek redress in this life? Yes. But often you will need to wait for His timing and His means. Here are powerful words to people who had few rights, were owned by others, even other Christians and suffered injustice.

Instructions to Those Who are Employers (4:1)

We can understand Paul writing to Christians who were slaves. That makes perfect sense. Their station in life would have been very difficult to change. But next, we have this word from God to... masters. We are applying these instructions to Christian employers and bosses and managers. Here are your responsibilities in the light of our Christian realities.

4 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Do we exemplify, as managers or bosses, our master in heaven?

Responsibility to the Employee

You are to provide what is right, just and fair. This is across the board. It includes compensation, the work environment, the demands on time and effort. Christian employers should be good to work for.

Reason for the Employer

The Lord is your heavenly Master. Though you may own your company, you may own your department, you may be responsible for people and manage them, you do so under your Lord. In the way you treat your people, you are to put off the old and put on the new. The new life will work itself out in gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross-embracing, God glorifying Christian management.

What is desperately needed in our culture today is the salt and light of godly men and women in both white and blue color jobs. Men and women who will be advocates on their jobs for commitment to providing a whole day of quality work with an eye toward improving the company. Those in management, can advocate a fair and just treatment of workers so that Christ is glorified.

Reflect and Respond

Are you ready? Having heard and believed the truths of who we are in Christ and what He has done for us and in us, will you live like this?

What does your submission look like, wives?

What does your sacrificial love look like, husbands?

What does your obedience look like, children?

What does your parenting look like, fathers?

What does your work look like, all of you?

What your managing look like, you who are in leadership positions.

For a moment, consider applying everything you have heard this morning in the context of the church. Submission, love, not provoking, obeying, serving, leading... who and what you are at home will emerge in who you are and what you do in the gathered church.

Personally, practically, with visible progress, are you living the gospel-grounded, Christ-centered, cross embracing, God-glorifying Christian life?