

Colossians 3:18-4:1 - The Christian Family

I. Introduction

A. This morning, we are continuing in the third section of Colossians with Colossians 3:12-17

1. But, again, before we start, I want to remember what Colossians is about and how Colossians is organized
2. So, we'll start with our purpose statement for Colossians: Colossians calls us to see how truly glorious Jesus is and to root all of our hope in Him knowing that He is true wisdom to meet our every need. This will prevent us from instead pursuing the hopes and purposes of this world and being captured by worldly wisdom.
3. And the outline we're Colossians, we are looking at Colossians in four parts:
 - a. Rooted in the Gospel (~ chapter 1)
 - b. Refusing Worldly Wisdom (~ chapter 2)
 - c. Renewed in Christ (~ chapter 3)
 - d. Relational Truth (~ chapter 4)

B. For the last couple of weeks we have been in the third section of Colossians: Renewed in Christ

1. This section is the positive response to Paul's warning to the Colossians - if chapter 2 is what the Colossians should not get trapped in, should not pursue, then chapter 3 is what the Colossians should devote themselves to
2. So several weeks ago, we looked at Colossians 3:5-11 and saw that Paul's practice is to forsake earth - to put to death that which is earthly in you, to kill off those things that are contrary to Christ, whether they be Christ-dishonoring hearts, Christ-dishonoring relationships, or Christ-dishonoring community
3. The next week, we focused on Colossians 3:9-11 and saw that Paul's practice is centered on a corporate re-creation reflected in the local church - the group of people who are together being remade into the image of Christ for His glory
4. And when we left off in Colossians, we looked at Colossians 3:12-17 and saw that Paul's practice is to embrace heaven - we need to put on the righteousness of Christ in a real way by acknowledging who we are in Christ and who our brothers and sisters are in Christ - which means we will put on Christ-like attitudes toward one another and we will pursue activities together that help us to see and pursue Christ better together

C. So, our last three studies in Colossians have focused on the people of God as a whole which are gathered together in local churches - how do we as a church pursue Christ together?

1. But this week as we move into verse 18, Paul's focus is going to shift somewhat - instead of talking about general relationships in the church, the one another statements, he is going to speak to specific relationships in the church
2. Specifically, Paul is going to be speaking to relationships within families today - Paul acknowledges that families are central to God's plan for the church so if a church should put on the attitudes of Christ then that must start in the family
3. So Paul is going to look at three sets of relationships that make up the family and describe how we can live in these relationships for the honor of Christ, for the good of the church and for the good of each other

D. Read Colossians 3:18-4:1

E. Proposition: If we have been raised with Christ, we must put on Christ and this must start in our families. If we want to display the glories of Christ together as a church we must start by living in our families in a way that demonstrates that Christ is Lord.

1. First, I want to make some observations about our passage this morning
2. Second, I want to listen to the exhortations of our passage this morning
3. Third, I want to notice the encouragements given in our passage this morning

II. Observations

A. Before we dive in and look at the individual commands that make up our passage this morning, I want to stop and think about why Paul put this passage here

1. Clearly Paul didn't just randomly throw commands together and he organized other books like Ephesians similarly
2. So there is something important about why this passage is here - we shouldn't just listen to the commands we should also think about what drove Paul to add this passage here
3. So I wanted to start this morning by making some observations about our passage this morning

B. First: Paul understands that the church is made up of families (or households)

1. In verses 9-17, Paul has clearly been addressing the local church and Paul's audience doesn't drastically change as he enters verse 18 - Paul is giving commands that should be lived out in local churches
2. But local churches are made up of families, so the correct way to live in a local church is going to involve thinking through the correct way to live in a family
3. The church and the family are not opposed to one another, nor does one consume the other - both relationships are ordained by God as part of His plan of salvation to display the glories of Christ and the church should rejoice in the family and the family should rejoice in the church
4. The National Center for Family Integrated Churches put out a statement several years ago called "A Biblical Confession for Uniting Church and Family" that I think captured this truth well
 - a. *ARTICLE VI — Church is a Family of Families - We affirm that our Heavenly Father designed His church to be a spiritual "family of families" where members know one another intimately, the shepherds understand the sheep effectively, and the various body parts function interactively. We deny/reject the current trend to value numbers and size more than intimacy and vitality by building impersonal mega-churches rather than the multiplication of family-like congregations.*
 - b. *ARTICLE VII — Family is a Building Block - We affirm that the biblical family is a scripturally ordered household of parents, children, and sometimes others (such as singles, widows, divorcees, or grandparents), forming the God-ordained building blocks of the church. We deny/reject the church's implementation of modern individualism by fragmenting the family through age-graded, peer-oriented, and special-interest classes, thus preventing rather than promoting family unity.*
5. The church and the family are both designed by God and neither can ignore the other without significant consequences
 - a. The church should pursue the family and the family should pursue the church, neither exalting nor denigrating either institution

C. Second: Therefore a healthy church is made up of healthy families, strengthening the family is strengthening the church

1. Paul's overarching goal in this section is to describe how the church should function in a healthy manner - how is the church going to display the glories of Christ? And as part of that goal, Paul describes how the family should function
2. Basically, Paul is saying that the church cannot function correctly without healthy families - dysfunctional families will invariably lead to a dysfunctional church
3. So a primary goal of any local church should be strengthening the families in that church, teaching what their relationships should look like within the family and helping them to apply that teaching in their home - if you want to build up the church, a good place to start is by building up the families that are in the church
4. Again, the statement "A Biblical Confession for Uniting Church and Family" captures this well
 - a. *ARTICLE IX — Church and Family Method is Relationships - We affirm that the saints of God are to be equipped for spiritual ministry and maturity primarily through family-based, one-on-one, heart-level relationships, and especially by preparing fathers to be servant-leaders in family and church. We deny/reject the popular church system that has replaced heart-level relationships with activity-based programs, and has supplanted father involvement with clergy dominance.*
 - b. *ARTICLE X — Church and Family Milieu is Everyday Life - We affirm that the church's relationships are nurtured primarily through daily discipleship in everyday life, especially fathers and mothers training their families and living out the gospel in ministry to the saints and witness to the lost. We deny/reject family-fragmenting, facility-based programs which disregard the Church as a people in community and which displace family-integrated outreach through "loving our neighbor as our self."*
5. If a church wants to grow up into Christ it must help families to grow up into Christ
 - a. Now assuredly there are all sorts of qualifications that can be made here - for example a single person in their own household is just as important in the local church as a large family, and this truth doesn't dismiss them at all
 - b. But the truth still stands - a healthy church must be built up of healthy families, so an excellent way of building up the church is by building up the families in the church

D. Third: This is because relationships in the family are applications of the attitudes of the church; Paul's commands here to the family are specific applications of Paul's thoughts in the last six verses

1. That is, we don't live in our families in a different way than we live in our church, instead the family is the first place that we should live out the qualities of verse 12-17
 - a. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving each other, and loving each other describes how the church relates to each other but each of these must start at home
 - b. We must live in our homes with compassionate hearts, with kindness, with humility, with patience, we must bear with one another in our families, we must be quick to forgive each other in our families, we must love our families
2. We can see that family relationships are applications of church relationships clearly in the parallel passage in Ephesians
 - a. We ended our study last week with Colossians 3:16-17, and we're continuing on in verses 18-19 this morning - *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 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. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*
 - b. In Colossians the break between doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus and the command to wives seems a little abrupt, but consider the parallel passage in Ephesians 5
 - c. Ephesians 5:19-24 - *Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*
3. In Ephesians Paul adds that little phrase - *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ* - as a summation of his commands to the church
 - a. To be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving and loving is to submit to one another, to see others as more important than yourself in Christ and to serve them for their good
 - b. And then Paul moves into the family with the same word - *wives, submit to your husbands* - Paul is moving from the church to the family and his commands are based on the same principle
 - c. And that principle from our last study was - we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, we belong to Christ so we can reflect Christ toward each other - we can do that together as a church and we can do that together as families

E. Fourth: So families are the breeding ground for the attributes of Colossians 3:12-15 - if you can't practice these things to those whom you are closest to, then any other practice of them is merely hypocrisy

1. The commands that we studied in verse 12-17 are commands that happen in an intimate community - a community who knows each other well and lives together in ways that require bearing with one another, forgiving each other, being patient with one another
2. And the interesting thing about these commands is that they get harder and harder the more intimate the relationship is - the more you live with each other, the more you know each other, the more you are vulnerable with each other the harder humility and compassion and patience and forgiveness become
3. So sometimes we can appear to be living out these commands with those we don't see all that often because it's easy to bear with someone who you don't have to be around all the time
4. The best growth in these attributes will happen in the closest relationships, which means we ought to pursue and practice these things all the more in our homes - practice bearing with one another, practice being patient with one another, practice having compassion for one another in your homes
5. When you practice these qualities toward your spouse, towards your children, towards your parents then you will be ready and able to practice them well and without hypocrisy toward others in your church

III. Exhortations

- Having made some observations about the passage, we'll turn and look at the actual commands that Paul records
- As Paul turns and looks at the family, he is going to record three relationship pairs: husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slave and these three relationships would have defined a household in the 1st century

A. We'll start with the first relationship: husbands and wives - loving leadership and joyful submission

1. *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*
2. We'll start with the command to wives since that's where Paul starts
 - a. And I think Paul starts here because his thought process has centered on submission
 - i. As we looked at earlier, Paul sums up the commands to the church with the command to submit to one another - Paul is rejoicing in submission, so he turns and says, "wives, you have a special way of displaying the glory of submission in your relationship with your husband"
 - b. The word submission here literally means to order yourself under someone else or to set yourself under
 - i. It is closely related to the word 'obey' but I think has more of a lifestyle connotation to it - your goal is to respect them and honor their desire not merely obey their words
 - c. And Paul says that wives should embody this concept toward their husbands
 - i. So a wife ought to set herself under her husband - she should seek to honor his desires and to pursue his goals, she should follow and even embrace and celebrate his leadership
 - ii. Now this doesn't mean a wife shouldn't participate in decisions or speak wisdom into a situation or make her desires known, this doesn't mean that a wife is a secondary member of her home
 - iii. But even when doing these things she is setting herself under her husband and is willing to follow his lead
 - d. And Paul hints here why wives are called to this path - because this glorifies Christ
 - i. Ephesians 5 goes into more detail - *Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*
 - ii. A wife's submission is appropriate in Christ because through this a believing wife can display the glory of the church submitting to Christ - a wife's submission speaks volumes about how the church relates to Christ because the relationship between husband and wife was designed to display this greater relationship
 - iii. So a wife's submission in Christ is fitting in the Lord and refusal to submit would be inappropriate, not because the husband necessarily deserves submission - husbands are often wrong and often ungodly - but because a lack of submission would speak something untrue about how the church relates to Christ
3. But then Paul immediately turns to the husbands and balances out this command to wives
 - a. First, Paul says, positively, that husbands must love their wives
 - i. This is a word that we already looked at last week in relationship to the whole church, and we defined it as choosing to feel undeserved affection and to show undeserved favor to another even at our own expense
 - ii. And we saw that love was what bound all the other attributes together - compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness - these are the things that flow out of love
 - iii. This is how a husband must relate to his wife, he must choose to feel affection for her and to seek her good, he must be full of compassion, and kindness, and humility even in the leadership role
 - iv. In a way, Paul is saying that husbands should be submitting to their wives as well - now that is a potentially twisted statement and I don't mean that there isn't authority that the husband holds, but as Paul says in Ephesians, we ought to all be submitting to one another
 - v. Husbands can live this out through using leadership to serve their wives not themselves, to build her up and seek her good - by leading her for her best he is showing deference to her needs even over his own
 - b. And then Paul says, negatively, that husbands should not be harsh with their wives
 - i. In other words, a wife's submission does not mean a husband can assert dictatorial command - really the commands are two sides of the same coin - to love is to not be harsh - Paul is saying, "use your authority for your wife's good and get rid of any notion that your authority is for your own selfish good"
 - ii. So a husband doesn't go around commanding his wife, demanding that she do things his way, berating her for real or imagined failures - instead he listens to his wife, he seeks out her desires, he looks for ways to build her up and to exalt her, he looks for ways to meet her needs
 - c. Now Paul doesn't really speak to any reasons for this here in Colossians, but he explains in Ephesians
 - i. Ephesians 5:25 - *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy,*
 - ii. If wives submit to their own husbands in order to display the glory of the church's relationship to Christ, then a husband must exercise authority in a way that displays Christ's love and service to the church
 - iii. Christ didn't selfishly use authority to enslave His people, He lovingly used His authority to save His people, and that should be what a husband aspires to - to reflect in small ways what Christ did for the church

B. Parents and children - nurturing leadership and earnest obedience

1. Now we spent a long time looking at the relationship between husbands and wives and we'll have to be briefer on the next two relationships
 - a. But I think that's ok for two reasons - first, the relationship of husband and wife is foundational to the family and other relationships flow out of that, and second, the relationship of husband and wife demonstrates how differentiation in roles, one leading and one submitting, can work to the glory of Christ
2. So Paul turns to parents and children - *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*
3. So Paul speaks to children first - and we should note that Paul expects that children are in church and listening in church and learning how to follow Jesus and we ought to expect that to - so kids, I hope you are paying attention this morning, because Paul's speaking specifically to you right now
 - a. And Paul's command is simple - kids, you can participate well in your family to glorify Jesus by obeying your parents, not sometimes, not when you want to, not when you agree, but in everything, all the time
 - b. Paul says that when you obey your parents well, you are making Jesus happy - and this is because when you are obeying you are showing something about God
 - c. God says that all of Jesus' people are His children and He wants us to obey because He is God, but also because He is our Father and He loves us and cares for us and obeying Him will bring us joy
 - d. When you obey your parents, your saying that you believe that God is our Father and He does love us and that obeying is the best thing we can do and when you choose not to obey, you are saying you don't believe that
 - e. So children, work hard at obeying because God has given you parents for your good, to protect you and help you, and because you believe that God is a good Father and obeying is always the best thing we can do
4. And then Paul turns and speaks to parents
 - a. Specifically he speaks to fathers because as the leaders in their home they need to take the initiative and the responsibility for setting the tone of childrearing in their home, but we can see this command as to parents
 - b. And like the command to husbands, Paul uses his second command to clarify the leadership parents have
 - c. And Paul says that parents should not provoke their children to anger lest they become discouraged - this is an interesting statement, but I think what Paul is trying to say is that parents should use their authority to nurture their children not to dominate their children
 - d. Parents shouldn't be harsh or unnecessarily overbearing, they should carefully use their authority to help their children grow up to see who Jesus is well - your children are called to obey you, use that authority for their good
 - e. And again, this says something about God - if God is our Father, He has used His infinite authority to order all things together for our good, to lead us to Christ, and to bless us with every spiritual blessing in Christ - parents ought to lead their children in this same way - to reflect in a small way how God has led us

C. Masters and slaves - Christ-oriented authority and Christ-oriented service

1. *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.*
2. Paul spends the most words speaking to masters and slaves in Colossians, much more than to husbands and wives or to parents and children
 - a. But these are also the hardest commands to apply in this passage because mostly we don't have these relationships in households anymore, at least in 21st century America
 - b. Now there are ways we could apply these things to a lot of different relationships, like employer/employee relationships, but that's not exactly what Paul is speaking toward because he's talking about households
 - c. So, I'm not going to apply these commands to any specific area, but I would encourage you to think through how you could apply these principles in different parts of your life
3. And Paul's commands to slaves and masters are very similar to his commands to husbands and wives and to parents and children - slaves, serve wholeheartedly in light of Christ and masters, lead fairly in light of Christ
 - a. Slaves should serve their masters well again because they are displaying something about Christ - we are slaves of Christ, slaves of righteousness
 - b. So slaves should earnestly obey their masters in everything, even when they're not looking, and they should work heartily for their masters - they should serve with all their heart in honor of Christ
 - c. And masters should not abuse their authority - they need to use their authority to display that Christ is a loving master and to display that they themselves are servants of Christ, not absolute authorities
 - d. So they should use their authority with justice and fairness in a way that honors Christ

IV. Encouragements

- Throughout our passage this morning, Paul speaks words of encouragement both to those in leadership and to those in submission to encourage them to live out their roles well, and I want to finish by considering these encouragements

A. Encouragement for Christ-honoring Submission

1. Paul doesn't have any rosy glasses on that he thinks submission is easy in this world, so to all those who are called to submission - wives, children, slaves, and in the end, all of us - he gives encouragement to help us joyfully submit, and he says three things
2. First, in submission your service is not ultimately to others, but to Jesus Christ
 - a. Colossians 3:23 - *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,*
 - b. This is the ultimate encouragement in situations we are called to submit in because every instance of submission in this world is submission to another imperfect human being
 - c. But, even in submitting to imperfect human beings, that is not ultimately who we are submitting to or serving - we can joyfully submit in different areas of our lives because we know that ultimately we are serving Christ
 - d. So, the first encouragement is: set the situation against the greater backdrop - you get to serve Christ right now
3. Second, in submission your reward is not ultimately from others, but from Jesus Christ
 - a. Colossians 3:24 - *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*
 - b. Another reason submission is hard is because it is so often overlooked and unappreciated, but Paul speaks encouragement to that as well - in the end, your submission and service will never be overlooked
 - c. If you are submitting in honor of Christ, then Christ Himself will reward you for your service, even if men don't
 - d. So, the second encouragement is: set your eye on the final prize not the immediate disappointment - you will be rewarded amply by Christ
4. Third, in submission your vindication is not ultimately from others, but from Jesus Christ
 - a. Colossians 3:25 - *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*
 - b. A third reason submission is hard is that in submission we are vulnerable to being mistreated by fellow human beings, but Paul speaks encouragement to that as well - in the end all wrongs will be made right
 - c. If someone mistreats you, you can submit because you know that that sin will be repaid by God Himself, whether in Christ at the cross or at the last judgment - your mistreatment won't be ignored, injustice will not stand
 - d. So, the third encouragement is: don't fear what men might do, instead rest in what you know God will do
5. And there's a related thread in each of these encouragements
 - a. The ultimate encouragement in submission is to orient your submission around the things of Christ - your service is to Christ, your reward is from Christ, and your vindication is from Christ
 - b. In other words, in submission, treasure Christ - your love for Christ is what will fuel submission even in hard circumstances, and when you submit in hard circumstances you will receive ample reward in Christ

B. Encouragement for Christ-honoring Authority

1. Paul also doesn't have rosy glasses on and thinks that authority isn't easily abused, so he gives encouragement to those who are in authority to help them think through how to use their authority well in honor of Christ
2. First, Paul says your authority is not for you, it is for others' good just as Jesus used His authority for your good
 - a. When Paul speaks to those in authority, he directs their thoughts back to those they are in authority over
 - i. To husbands in Colossians 3:19 - *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*
 - ii. To fathers in Colossians 3:21 - *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*
 - b. Paul is saying to husbands and fathers, as you lead your family, you should have their good in mind, not your benefit or your ease and this is because this is how Christ has used His authority for you
 - i. Matthew 20:25-28 - *But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*
 - ii. Christ came with all authority and He used it to serve, not to be served and He has given you authority to use it in the same way - your authority is not for you, it is for others' good

3. Second, Paul says your authority is not from you, it is from Jesus Christ and you are in submission to Him
 - a. Colossians 4:1 - *Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*
 - b. Paul would say to all who are in positions of authority - remember as you lead that you are not ultimate, you are a servant as well and your leadership should reflect that
 - c. So your leadership should be used in humility, recognizing that you too are under submission - you aren't anything special, you have simply been entrusted with a task
 - d. And your leadership should be used in obedience, recognizing the one to whom you are in submission - your leadership must reflect Christ because you are His servant
4. And, again, there's a related thread in each of these encouragements
 - a. The ultimate encouragement in authority is to orient your authority around the things of Christ - your authority should reflect Christ's authority and your authority should be in submission to Christ's authority
 - b. In other words, in authority, treasure Christ - your submission to Christ is what will fuel godly authority even when you would be tempted to use your authority wrongly - so lead in honor of Christ