What Is Colossians 3:18–4:1 Saying about Submission within Family and Society?

In our current environment, if you want to cause offense, then all you have to do is read [Colossians 3:18-4:1](https://ref.ly/Col%203.18-4.1;esv?t=biblia) regarding our roles in family and society:

*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. 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. 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 bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

Paul’s exhortations in Colossians are in our day like a door slammed in the face. Mention wives submitting, kids obeying, and servants serving, and people get angry. Indeed, few passages in Scripture are more dismissed, disparaged, and explained away than this one.

One writer on this text said, “male authority over women is pagan, anti-gospel; it cannot be redeemed; it can only be aborted.” Others deride Paul as a misogynist who upholds an unjust patriarchy. Still others posit that this passage is not from Paul’s hand, but it is a later addition. However, the most common way to ignore these demands is to label them as ancient cultural accommodation that is irrelevant to us as modern people.

Yet, even as these verses make us uncomfortable, the fact remains that they belong to Holy Scripture, which God inspired for our training in righteousness. Thus, the question stands: Will we heed God’s word or replace it with human opinion? As we will see, the wisdom Paul displays in these directives gives us both the liberty to live in gratitude and the loving comfort of our true master, Jesus Christ.

The Practicality of Living Out Heavenly Realities Here and Now

This passage is in the larger section of Colossians where Paul is laying out how we set our minds on the things above and then pursue these heavenly realities here and now. Seeking the things above is not some escapist technique where we meditate in a cave, but it is rather the *active changing of our clothes*. It is the stripping off the old man with its evil ways of anger, greed and lying; and it is the donning of the new man, Christ, with its rich threads of patience, compassion, and, above all, love. And Paul wraps up our new outfit by calling us to do everything—whatever we say or do—with gratitude 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. ([Col. 3:17](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.17;esv?t=biblia))

Yet, this universal exhortation, “do everything,” is a bit ambiguous. How do we do *all*things with gratitude? This is so global as we struggle on how to work it out in the practical, everyday realities of life, so Paul gives us some particulars. He lays out some specific ways we can do everything with gratitude to God. And for these specifics, Paul gives us what was common in his day, namely a domestic (or household) code.

Now, these domestic codes had a long and respectable history within the classical Greek moral philosophers, Roman stoic thinkers, and even Jewish scholars. And these domestic codes were addressed to men as the master, father, and husband of the household.

Understanding the Greco-Roman World

Domestic codes laid out for the man, as the [*pater familia*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pater_familias) who had total authority, how to manage his household in a moral and honourable way. Thus, the regular topics included duties such as honouring the gods, raising children, dealing with servants, being a husband, and being active in local politics. Yet, where the responsibilities deal with the individual, the goal of the domestic code was larger.

In the Greco-Roman world, a common belief was that the family or household was a microcosm of the society and state as a whole. The health of the household reflected directly on the well-being of the state. Thus, the man being a good father was not just about the individual but also covered the communal.

This is why Greeks and Romans were sceptical of religions that attracted the allegiance of women or servants, destabilized the family and therefore also the state. This was also true for converts to Judaism. For Greeks and Romans, the family had to worship the Roman gods of paterfamilias.

When a family member or servant would convert to worshipping the Lord alone, this meant the convert would forsake the family gods, which was equivalent to repudiating both family and state. Conversion to Judaism was seen as a scandal, a social disruption that could be met with hostility and persecution, and conversion to Christ would have been the same. It is similar today when someone comes to Christ from Islam. The family can and may disown you.

The Importance of Living Honourably before Outsiders

Thus, Jewish teachers would use the domestic code to show that they were not a threat to society, as they too managed the household well. And Paul uses this domestic code in a similar way. The neighbours of the Colossians would be wondering if this church—these Christians—were some weird and dangerous cult that needed to be squashed.

Even today, the government has a list of dangerous and suspicious religious groups. We don’t want the church on that list. Thus, Paul’s concern here is that believers live honourably before outsiders according to natural law. He is interested in the well-being of the church and the name of Christ, even though today we tend to think primarily in terms of individual rights and feelings such as, “I don’t want to have to submit.”

Paul, though, has his mind first on the corporate good—for the church and even for the state.  Paul is using wisdom to outline our duties in natural law within the family and society, which will be good for the church and with an eye to heaven. These duties explain how we seek the things above.

Wives Submitting to Their Husbands

Paul begins with the marriage relationship:

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ([Col. 3:18](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.18;esv?t=biblia))

Right out of the gate, Paul does something different from the normal domestic codes by addressing the wives. The Greek and Roman codes were only addressed to the men, but Paul speaks to the wives as valuable moral agents.

It is important to note that he is speaking to married women—Paul’s words here don’t apply to single or unmarried women. Thus, women do not submit to men in general as only the wife submits to her husband. Next, the wives are called to submit themselves—this is something *they*do. Paul doesn’t tell the husbands to make their wives submit; no, the wife submits herself.

But what does submit mean? Well, at the most basic level, it means to put yourself under authority, to be under one who has responsibility for you. So, the wife being under the husband’s authority connects to the created order in Genesis 1. It means God will hold the husband primarily responsible for the marriage. Yet, submission is always suited to the particular relationship.

When an enemy submits to the victorious kings, this may be coercive, but no such harshness is implied here. Rather, in a close relationship between equals, submission has the sense of holding one another accountable. In Ephesians, Paul tells the saints to submit to one another. In Corinthians he writes,

And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. ([1 Cor. 14:32](https://ref.ly/1%20Cor.%2014.32;esv?t=biblia))

Thus, Paul is making the point that wives are accountable to their husbands. And we find the prime example of submission in Christ Jesus. Jesus submitted himself to the Father—even to death on the cross. On the final day, Christ Jesus will put all things under his feet, to offer it all to God, and he will submit to the Father ([Heb. 2:7-8](https://ref.ly/Heb.%202.7-8;esv?t=biblia)).

Clearly, there is nothing abusive or harsh with Jesus submitting to the Father. Rather, this was the perfect harmony of will; it was the Son serving the Father in love to please him. It was the Son putting the Father before himself. For the wife to image Christ Jesus in this way is a beautiful and noble calling. Yet, note the nuance Paul adds: “as is proper or fitting in the Lord” ([Col. 3:18](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.18;esv?t=biblia)). This has two implications.

First, it is proper and right for the wife to submit. This pleases God. Second, it limits the wife’s submission to ways that are proper. There are improper ways of wifely submission, which the wife should not do. The wife should not be improper in the Lord to her husband. This propriety begs the question. What is proper?

And this is the brilliant wisdom of Paul in that he says no more. In the common domestic codes, details could be listed for the wife, such as staying indoors, how she dressed, what she could do, and so on. Yet, Paul is silent about such matters; and in such silence, there is freedom. And this freedom allows for cultural and personal diversity.

What is proper submission? Well, in wisdom you have to figure it out—there is no one way.  Paul doesn’t impose the structures of Greek or Jewish marriage on us. So also, we should not color in this submission with the hues of Victorian or 1950 views on marriage. While there is nothing particularly good or bad about such historical expressions of marriage, we are not bound to them. Rather, what is proper in the Lord will vary within Christian wisdom from one time and place to another.

As a couple, the husband and wife will figure out what this submission looks like, and the norms of society will influence this for good or ill. Yet, within this freedom, the wife should have a willingness and openness to be accountable to her husband.

The wife should acknowledge the good created order of God, where the Lord holds the husband accountable as head. And she should have this willing spirit first for the Lord and secondly for her husband. Besides, where wives are called to submit, husbands are called to make this submission easy and delightful, as they must love their wives.

Husbands Loving Their Wives Next, Paul addresses husbands:

Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ([Col. 3:19](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.19;esv?t=biblia))

The word “harsh” here refers to being angry or feeling bitter towards one’s wife. A better translation would be, “Husbands love your wives and don’t get angry with them.” The one husband-vice Paul highlights here is anger: Don’t get angry with your wife; don’t harbor an attitude of animosity against her; rather, love her. Here again, a difference stands out from the common domestic codes.

For the Greeks and Romans, husbands were called to care for their wives, to make sure they were honourable and even kind to them. But this kindness was often self-serving: if you are nice, your life will be easier. In fact, Greek husbands often raised kids with their wife, but they loved a mistress on the side. Yet, Paul forbids such infidelity and tells men to love their wives. And such love restricts and completely reshapes their authority.

For the love of which Paul is writing here links back to love being the bond of perfection that unites those sweet virtues of humility, compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. Such love seeks the good of the wife first. It doesn’t lord its will over the wife—my way or the highway—but wants to please the wife, to do what she wants to do. If the wife’s submission echoes Christ’s, then the husband’s love reverberates with the Father’s love. And our heavenly Father’s love is so profound and perfect that submitting to it is a joy, a security, the best place ever.

The husband’s love should be like a warm, fuzzy blanket on a cold day; something that the wife cannot wait to get under. Paul preserves the created order of the husband being the head, but the freedom and love of Christ permeates the marriage relationship so that it can be wisely proper and beautiful—no matter the time or cultural setting.

Children Obeying Their Parents

Of course, marriage is only one part of the domestic code, so Paul next moves on to the parent-child relationship:

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ([Col. 3:20](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.20;esv?t=biblia))

Again, as Paul echoes the Fifth Commandment, he is clearly advocating for natural law and the created order, but a few things stand out here. First, he says, “parents,” not just dads. The mother has authority, too. Second, he tells children this pleases the Lord. Within the heavenly mindedness of Christ, kids obey first to please the Lord. They follow their parents’ orders to please the Lord who saved them; this is their primary motive. Finally, Paul says obey in *everything*!

Wait a minute. Everything? This is too much—surely there needs to be an exception clause. What if your dad told you to murder someone? Or your mom demanded you to worship another god? You can’t obey these orders. True, this “everything” doesn’t include following a parental command to sin. In fact, many Christians converted to Christ in direct disobedience to their pagan parents.

Then why say *everything*? Well, this gets at our orientation—our first inclination. You see, if we start out with exceptions, then we become prone to making excuses for why we don’t need to obey. We multiply exceptions as a way to justify a disobedient spirit.

Because their dad was grumpy or their mom got angry, children might think that they don’t need to heed or listen when their parents are like this. But this is a wrong spirit. Paul says “in everything” so that kids are oriented towards obedience—it should be their first inclination, their primary motive to obey their parents no matter what and do it unto the Lord.

Limits and Restrictions of Fathers’ Authority

Moreover, even though Paul doesn’t give kids an exception clause, he does tell dads to be careful. Note that he doesn’t say parents or mothers and fathers. Paul speaks to the dads to limit and restrict their authority:

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ([Col. 3:21](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.21;esv?t=biblia))

Provoke has the sense of starting a war, acting in a harsh or hostile way that provokes the other to push back, fight back, or rebel. Particularly, Paul’s admonition “do not provoke” is to prevent discouragement in children where they lose heart and become dispirited. The picture that comes to mind is where the dad has such high standards that the kids can never meet them.

Perhaps the dad never says, “Good job,” “I’m proud of you,” or “Wow! Well done.” Instead, the dad always critiques, pointing out how the girl could have done better or the boy made a mistake. Because the child can never please dad, she gives up. Why bother trying if you always fail?

So, Paul tells dads not to provoke their kids to rebel—don’t discourage them from even trying to obey. Don’t give your kids, as is often expressed today, “daddy issues.” In doing this, Paul protects the kids from abusive treatment from their dads. Even though our efforts to please our heavenly Father are always rather pathetic, the Father still looks upon us in Christ and says, “Well done. I love you.” May we as fathers encourage our sons and daughters onward towards faith and wisdom with the same gentleness and love.

Obedience and Respect as First and Foremost in Social and Economic Relationships

There is one more category of relationship that Paul covers in this domestic code: servant and master. Now, thankfully slavery and all the evils that come along with it are no longer part of our country. But, as a man of his day, Paul assumed the reality of slavery and addressed it.  Furthermore, the word for slave or servant here could cover all sorts of different servants.

The master/servant relationship has one foot in the household and the other in society. And since Paul doesn’t mention hired-hand or day-laborer, servant/master here can represent all social and economic relations of inferior and superior. Thus, the principles here apply to boss/employee, student/teacher and other such relationships. Paul begins in the same way he did with children— “Obey in everything”:

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. ([Col. 3:22](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.22;esv?t=biblia))

Again, this directive is oriented towards obedience and respect as first and foremost. Clearly, there are exceptions as many of the slaves who were members of the church were there in direct disobedience to their pagan masters, but our inclination ought to be towards obedience and not for excuses to disregard. Note the character of this service. It is not to be by the way of eye-service as people-pleasers. When your boss is looking, in order to get in brownie-points, you work well. But when the boss isn’t looking, you drag your feet, cut corners, and do shoddy work.

We know well what this looks like. We go into a store or sit down in a restaurant, and the server seems to care little about us. They make us wait, show no interest in us, act like we are a bother to them, and have no quality in their work. This is not how we are to do our jobs. Rather, with sincerity of heart, we are to work heartily, “fearing the Lord” ([Col. 3:22](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.22;esv?t=biblia)).

The fear of the Lord again highlights Paul’s wisdom theme. We work knowing that God is watching, and he holds us accountable (e.g., Psalm 139). Sincerity from the soul should characterize our work. With excellence and sincerity, we do our jobs unto the Lord for his good pleasure. Yet, it is all too easy for our minds naturally to go to our working conditions and how poor they may be. Especially for servants in the first century, the job could be rather miserable because of one’s boss, co-workers, or the labour itself.

Working in Environments That Take Advantage of Our Efforts

Our work places can be environments that do not reward excellence but take advantage of it. We put in overtime but don’t get paid for it. We go the extra mile, but it is ignored for promotion. We’re honest, and our boss punishes us for it. When working well is pointless, why bother? Well, this is where being heavenly minded really makes a practical difference.

As Paul says, we are to work heartily for the Lord and not for men ([Col. 3:23](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.23;esv?t=biblia)), knowing that we will receive from the Lord the reward of our inheritance. The image here is of a paycheck. We may not get paid from our earthly boss, but Christ will pay us with a heavenly inheritance. Of course, merit is not a factor here, as Christ’s righteousness grants us heaven as a gift. Yet, heaven is often used in Scripture as a reward from God for our toilsome earthly service. It expresses the Father’s pleasure and happiness in our good service.

Our excellent work may go unpaid, be despised, or taken advantage of by our earthly master, but no matter; our true Lord is watching. Jesus has a paycheck for us in the amount of the eternal riches of glory. For a slave who didn’t get paid, this would be an enormous comfort and encouragement. Paul, though, balances this reward with a warning,

The wrongdoer will be paid back and there is no partiality. ([Col. 3:25](https://ref.ly/Col.%203.25;esv?t=biblia))

To be a rebellious and lazy worker does not please God. And even though we may blame our shoddy work on our bad boss or evil co-workers, these excuses will not stand before God who shows no partiality. Paul encourages us with our heavenly reward, and he warns us with the seriousness of the final judgment.

The Limits and Restrictions of Superiors

Of course, as before, Paul balances his exhortation to servants by addressing the masters. He tells the servants to obey, but he limits and restricts the authority of master from any hint of abuse:

Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. ([Col. 4:1](https://ref.ly/Col.%204.1;esv?t=biblia))

The Greek word for “fairly” in [Colossians 4:1](https://ref.ly/Col%204.1;esv?t=biblia) can also be translated “equally.” Servants are to be treated as equals created in the image of God. In the hierarchal Roman world, this is stark: Master, treat your slaves equally. This shows that equality in Adam and in Christ does not necessarily undo all relationships of superior and inferior. This is also a high standard for bosses and masters. We all need to treat people equally, fairly, and justly, without showing favoritism.

The Lord doesn’t show favouritism, so neither should we. The controlling motive for these superiors is that they too have a master in heaven. Christ is their master in glory looking down on them. They may be the master of the house, but they are servants in Christ’s body, the church. This puts the masters on the same footing with the servants in verse 24—they are all serving Christ. By putting the bosses under Christ, everything he said to the servants applies also to the masters. Even though the earthly order continues, the heavenly mindedness has remade how we operate in this age.

The Purpose of Authority in Light of Heaven—Service in Love

In fact, if you note the different parties addressed here, one party gets mentioned three times—the man. The man is both husband, father, and master. And Paul directs the man in all three roles, which is quite counter-cultural. For Rome, paterfamilias had near absolute authority. The paterfamilias was unassailable.

Yet, Paul addresses the head of the household, and he aligns his authority as being the chief servant. The man loves his wife, doesn’t provoke his children, and treats his servants fairly—and he does it as the servant of Christ. In light of heaven, authority is not so much about power, but it is about service in love.

And being a servant of Christ applies to all of us. This is why the section of the servant is so much longer than the others, because it is true of all of us. And it is this heavenly mindedness of having eyes upon Christ that makes our service, submission, and obedience filled with gratitude.

Serving Christ Who Served Us unto Death

For we serve Jesus Christ who served us even unto death. Jesus submitted to the Father to be crucified for our sins. Christ obeyed the law that nailed him to that cursed piece of lumber. Jesus loved you more than his own life and bore the wrath of God on your behalf. With sincerity and devotion, Jesus was humbled through his life surrounded by hostile sinners. In order to fulfill justice and for the joy set before him, Jesus endured this most heinous injustice in his own flesh. If Jesus suffered injustice for his heavenly reward, so it is our honor to image our Lord in this regard.

Paul relieves what we suffer by calling those with authority to serve in love, even though Jesus had no such relief. Moreover, we serve Christ with the assurance of his love to forgive us and keep us for our heavenly reward. It is important to remember that these duties are worked out in the realm of wisdom. We will make honest mistakes and commit sin. Yet, with Christ there is the rock-solid assurance of grace and mercy to never let us go.

Every new day, decisions are before us, but new every morning is Christ’s tender mercy and steadfast love. May we serve Christ now with gratitude and wisdom and eyes looking to heaven; because we know that nothing can separate us from his love, and our heavenly inheritance is all of grace.

*This article is adapted from a*[*sermon on*](https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/111419844283629/a)[*Colossians 3:18-4:1*](https://ref.ly/Col%203.18-4.1;esv?t=biblia)*preached by Pastor Zach Keele at Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church on November 18, 2018, and was originally published at Beautiful Christian Life on February 18, 2019.*