



RELATIONSHIPS IN OUR NEW LIFE

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Think back over this past week. Where have you spent most of your waking life? I would suggest that it would be some combination of family and work. Think back to the last time you introduced yourself to someone new. What did you say about yourself? Again, there is a good chance that family and work played a big part in the picture of yourself that you gave.

Family and work are the two axes around which most of our lives revolve. So it is no surprise that when Paul seeks to get very practical about what our new life in Christ involves, he focuses on these areas. How we live as Christians in these areas is important and they need to reflect our relationship with God in Christ.

The context

Before we get into today's main section, which is v. 18 onwards, it is helpful to understand what they meant to the people who first heard them. What might have been their reaction when the letter was read to them? Of course, we can't know this for sure without a time machine, but we can get some idea by looking at the world they lived in. Once we understand this better, we can better understand how to apply these teachings to our own context.

There are two contexts we need to consider – how these verses fit into the wider context of this letter of Paul to the Colossians and how this letter fits into the context of the realities of the world in which the Colossians lived, the context of Colossae.

- Letter to the Colossians

Last week we explored the new life to which God calls us. I've included the last part of it in the readings today so that we can be reminded of what Paul said. Actually, I should have started the reading a verse earlier because Paul starts explain to our new life there. It says,

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilised, slave or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. (3:11)

Paul is saying that as we enter into a new life in Christ, social and religious and cultural divisions between people should slip away. It is not that we lose our identity, but that no one's identity is better than another and all are ultimately less important than our identity in Christ. The fact that we have become His people is what should define our lives and our interactions with others. So, the first concept that shapes the context of these verses is that our primary identity is our new relationship to Christ, the fact that we are all IN CHRIST.

As we read on, the next main point is that our actions are to be guided by love. Paul says,

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. (3:15)

The verses around flesh out the pictures by saying that this love will show itself in mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, harmony, forgiveness, and peace. This was a love which came from Christ and overflowed to all around them. The primary guideline of their lives must become the LOVE OF CHRIST.

Finally, Paul concluded this section by saying,

And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus ... (3:17)

Last week we looked at the idea that this new life is like a uniform that we wear to identify us with Christ. What we do and say reflects on the character of Christ just like a uniform we wear reflects on the organisation whose uniform we are wearing. Paul reminds the Colossians that the primary goal of their new life in Christ was to REPRESENT CHRIST to those around them so that others would see their lives and want to become God's people as well.

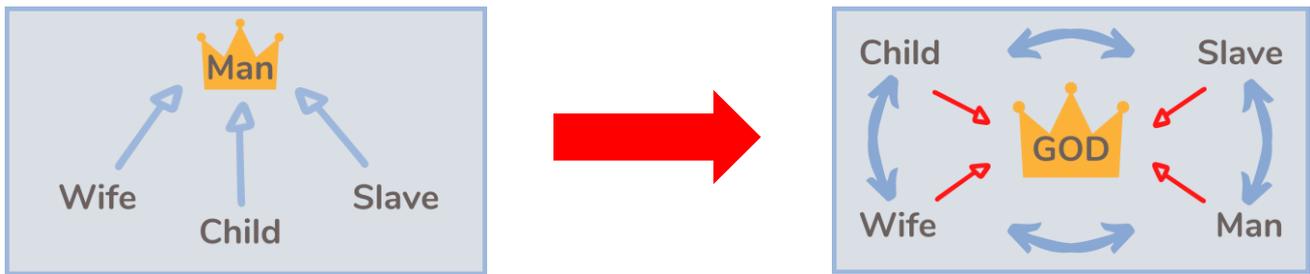
- Culture of Colossae

But what of the context of the society in which they were living? What was it like to live in Colossae, under Roman rule, at the middle of the first century? How was it different to what we know?

For one thing, the idea of a family, or household was quite a bit larger than the nuclear families as we know them. Within the average household of the day would be the husband and wife – possibly multiple wives - and children and grandchildren of all ages. A male child would probably stay in the household for his whole life. As he grew up, he would gradually take over responsibilities in the family business. When he got married, his wife would leave her family and come to live with him. Slaves were also considered to be a part of the household. They might have been domestic help or agricultural labourers, but they might also have been skilled workers such as tutors for the children and clerks for the family business. As you can imagine, in even a moderately wealthy family, this could be quite a large group of people.

The Romans saw this household as the empire in miniature. It was the smallest economic and social unit – the basic building block of the society. Like the Roman empire, it was strictly hierarchical. As the emperor had complete and final authority, so did the head of the household. As the emperor conquered nations and brokered alliances, marriages were designed to merge the interests of two households. Although love might develop over time, it certainly wasn't the priority.

This model demanded unquestioning submission of all to the head of the household – wife to husband, child to father, slave to master. Aristotle, an influential philosopher of this time, said that not only is this beneficial to the running of the household, but that it is the natural way of things because women, children and slaves are essentially inferior to adult men. They couldn't think for themselves and need to be told what to do. Therefore, Aristotle and others drew up rules of household management which gave absolute authority to the head of the household and instructed him on how to ensure obedience and submission. In essence, he "owned" the rest of the household and their main job was to make him look good and work for his economic and social advancement. Of course, if he was a good manager, they would benefit from his advancement, but they would always be second-class people.



The transformational shift

I think you can see that the early church was fast heading towards a clash of cultures. On the one hand they believed they were all equal in Christ and their relationships were to be controlled by the law of love. On the other hand, they lived in a rigidly hierarchical society where most people were little more than possessions with no rights.

What Paul wrote brought about a transformational shift in the way those early Christians thought and lived. Their new identity in Christ would have a profound impact on their most basic relationships, those which shaped their day to day lives. If we look at the beginning and end of this section, you will see what I mean. He says that they are, “... *those who belong to the Lord*” (3:18) and that all of them “*also have a Master – in heaven*” (4:1). Whereas the usual line of authority placed the man at the top, their new life in Christ placed each of them directly under the authority of God. Their lives shifted from being human-centred to being God-centred. He was their Master, not any earthly leader. Secondly, as those who are God’s people, reflecting His love, they are to shift from being self-centred, to being others-centred.

The implications

- The Colossian household

So, what did this mean for a Christian household in Colossae in the 1st Century? I believe the whole structure of the household changed as God became the centre of the household and all of the members of that household equally responsible to Him. Over and over in this passage they are told to “*do what please the Lord*”, to act in “*reverent fear of the Lord*” and are reminded that they are “*servant of the Lord*” first and foremost.

But how would placing God at the centre of the household affect the relationships within the household? How did things need to be re-aligned to reflect God’s love and their equality in Him? Here is where great wisdom was needed. They needed to balance the realities of their new life in Christ with the need to live in a society which lived by very different values. And they had to do so in a way that positively pointed people to God and his salvation.

Contemporary philosophers such as Aristotle used to group the household relationships into three pairs and so Paul follows this same pattern. First he addresses the husband and wife pair and says, “*Wives submit ... Husbands love*” (3:18,19). Paul asks wives to continue to submit to their husbands where this is possible. If wives had rebelled against their husbands, they could have made life very difficult for them and brought them into disrepute in the community. Instead, they needed to honour the role their husband played in society and seek to support them in any way they could. This didn’t involve subservient obedience, but a willingness to help their husband to lead the family in a godly way. Husbands, on the other hand were to be truly revolutionary and love their wives – love them as equal before God and equal in value and worth in the household. Although outwardly the husband would maintain his leadership of the family and the wife would honour that, behind the scenes would be a mutuality and respect and love which would transform the relationship.

We see a similar transformation in the parent-child relationship. The command is that “*children, always obey ... Fathers, do not aggravate*” (3:20,21) Paul asks the child to continue to obey as is culturally expected. Any form of disrespect from child to parent could bring the whole household into disrepute. In obeying, the child is respecting the responsibility which the parents carry to raise them and help them to find their way in the world. But that doesn’t mean that the parents can lord it over the child! Startlingly, Paul assumes that children are real people and as such, they are to be respected as individuals. Parents should get to know their children and seek to positively encourage them to develop into the people God wants them to be.

Finally, Paul spent the most time helping them to see how the master-slave relationship should be transformed. In many ways, this was the hardest transformation. Slaves were seen as mere possessions with absolutely no rights to their lives, their future or even their own body. When a slave became a Christian and began to realise his or her new identity in Christ, it must have been so liberating, but then frustrating to continue to live as if this new identity didn’t exist. And it must also have been scary for a Christian slave-owner to begin to realise that his attitude toward his slaves needed to change.

We can see some of the thinking which was going on at the time by reading the book of Philemon. This is a letter which Paul wrote to a leader of the Colossian church named Philemon about one of his slaves, Onesimus. Onesimus had run away and ended up with Paul where his life was turned around through God’s salvation. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon and explores with him how their relationship needed to change now that Onesimus was a brother in Christ and not just a possession. I wrote a paper on Philemon for my studies a couple of years ago and I found it fascinating to explore the many discussions about the situation. Many are disappointed that Paul does not command Philemon to free Onesimus. However, slavery was reality in the Roman world that couldn’t be changed overnight. In the meantime, Christians needed to know how to live in their current reality. I think Paul chooses to focus on the current reality and how Christians needed to live as things were. But in time things did change – largely due to the work of Christians!

Getting back to our current passage, I think what we see Paul doing is raising the status of slaves and lowering the status of owners, thus equalising them under the lordship of Christ. Slaves are not just possessions of a human master. Their work is elevated to holy service to God – and He is the one who will judge their work. Christian masters, on the other hand, are equally responsible to God for their actions. I don’t think we can understand how truly revolutionary this was in 1st century Roman society. The smooth running of the Roman way of life depended on slaves doing the hard work behind the scenes. They were kept in line by being stripped of their identity and worth with the threat of violence and death if they resisted or rebelled. To live as Paul suggests, took a great deal of trust in God and in each other. It didn’t come easily.

- Our relationships

But this is about a world very different to our own. What of all that Paul says in these verses are to be taken as rules for all times and situations? What are the implications for us, in this culture and in this time?

I think that we need to go back to Paul’s premise for this whole discussion. I think that what still holds for us today is that our primary identity is in Christ, our primary guideline is the love of Christ and our primary goal is to represent Christ in all we do. I think it also holds true that God must be the centre, the controlling force of our relationships. As we look at this diagram, we can see immediately that one thing has changed since Paul’s time. Here in Australia the master-slave relationship no longer exists as it once did. That’s not to say that slavery no longer exists here in Australia, but it is illegal and is not treated as the norm. Instead, we have the employer-employee relationship which has some similarities but is not identical.

I think it is helpful to realise first that the revolution which the early church began in seeing all people as equal has had a profound effect on our world. Over the past 2,000 years, Christians have been at the forefront of some significant cultural changes. In Roman times, there were no such things as “human rights”. But since then, Christians have campaigned to give worth and value to women and children, to the poor and oppressed, to all races and cultures. There would be no concept of human rights with Christians. Although some Christians misguidedly participated in slavery, many others fought against it. Although it still exists in distressing frequency, and there is much yet to be done, it is no longer an unquestioned part of our lives. Within the family, Christians have been rescuing abused wives and children and championing legislation against such abuse more than anyone else. Yes, we have not been perfect in this regard. Unfortunately, some have used these very verses, which Paul meant to bring freedom, to subjugate women and children to abusive men. But this is the exception, not the rule. And without a doubt, the largest and most effective protectors and rescuers of children at risk around the world have been Christian organisations. The good news of new life in Christ has changed the world!

But as for how we live our lives in our families and work? Guess what – I’m not going to give you any rules to follow! Because it is not about rules, but about walking with Christ and allowing Him to so change our hearts and our minds that we think differently and love more deeply. Out of transformed minds and hearts will flow a counter-cultural love and equality that will transform our relationships. Each situation will display our new identity in Christ in its own unique way. This adaptation takes wisdom from above and requires us to walk closely with God to discern His will for us. However, within every marriage and family, relationships must be characterised by mutual love and respect – the seeking of what is best for the others and a willingness to lay down our lives for each other. Within every working relationship, Christians must act with honesty and fairness, realising that everyone has value and worth. We must live in such a way as to be representatives of Christ and His salvation and new life.

Living in a broken world means that no relationship will be perfect and unfortunately some relationships will be abusive. I don’t believe that Paul would ever suggest that anyone should remain in an abusive situation. In his day, there were few ways to leave or change an abusive relationship and Christians had to trust God for their lives in a very literal way. However, because of the influence of Christian values on our society, this is not as true today. We can seek change in the workplace, we can leave a marriage if necessary, there are other options for neglected or abused children.

However, wherever possible, we must allow our new life in Christ to transform our relationships. As we submit to God, he will guide us as to how we are to submit to and love each other. This is not a wishy-washy love that papers over any problems, but a deep and transformative love based on Christ’s love for us. One of the final commandments Jesus gave to His disciples was:

“So now I am giving you a new commandment. Love each other. As I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34-36)

He has given His love to us. He has sacrificed all for our good. We must allow this love to fill us and to overflow to others, changing all our relationships and pointing a watching world back to Christ himself.