

RESTORING THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE HOME (COL. 3:18-21)

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Introduction

Since 1972, the National Data Program for the Social Sciences has been statistically monitoring trends in how American society works and what social changes are occurring in America. In 1997, utilizing the twenty-five years of collected data, they concluded the following concerning the American family:

“Few areas of society have changed as much as the family has over the last generation. The basic structure of the family has been reshaped and family values and related attitudes have also undergone notable transformations. Families are smaller and less stable, marriages less central and cohabitation more common, and within marriages gender roles and childrearing practices have become less traditional and more egalitarian. The flux that the family has been experiencing has in turn remade society. As Meng-tzu has noted "the root of the state is the family" and the transplanting that the family has been undergoing has uprooted society in general. Certain social problems such as juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse have probably been exacerbated by the family changes. Other consequences have been more positive such as greater equality for women. For society to thrive, dysfunctional changes in family structure and values must be addressed and reversed or compensated for.”¹

As this conclusion shows, the secular world is willing to acknowledge that the family has become less stable and that “dysfunctional changes in family structure and values” threaten society’s ability to thrive and “must be addressed.” However, this paragraph concludes the report and offers no solution to these problems. The secular world cannot explain or fix the problems families are facing apart from the God who created the family.

God has not left, without hope, the families He created. The Bible contains clear and sufficient instruction on the subject so that every family can glorify the Lord. One such passage that is complete and well-contained is in Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians. The entire book of Colossians supports the instruction to families given in Col. 3:18-21. This paper, primarily based on the teaching of Paul to the Colossians, will show how a family’s life can glorify God. To achieve this goal, the paper will work through the key themes of Colossians from Col. 1:1

through Col. 4:1. These themes will be seen in sections titled The Presupposition, The Power, The Person, The Priorities of Christians, and Putting the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Home.

The Presupposition

Paul begins his letter with a very important presupposition that bears mentioning if any aspect of life is to be the way God intends it to be. When he writes, “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae” (Col. 1:2) it is clear that the recipient must be a Christian. Paul’s letter of instruction is only addressed to those who have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Power

Paul sets the stage for the application of the principles he is about to teach when he prays for the believers of Colossae (Col. 1:9-11). In this prayer it can be seen that beyond having a relationship with Jesus Christ, it is essential that every believer “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” Believers are to live out the knowledge of His will that they have been given. The power to do this is elucidated in V.11 where Paul writes, “strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might...” (Col. 1:11). A person cannot please the Lord with his life through his own power. Only through the power of the Lord is a person able to walk worthy.

The Person

Having stated that our walk is dependent on the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul moves to establish how Jesus Christ is uniquely and solely qualified to provide that power by showing the reader who Jesus Christ is and what He has done (Col. 1:15-3:1). In the body of the this letter, Paul shows that Jesus Christ is Lord (1:15; 2:9), the Lord of Creation (1:16-17), the Lord of the Church (1:18-20), the Lord of every Christian (1:21-23), the Lord of Christian

Ministry (1:24-28), and the Lord over Sin and Death (2:20; 3:1). This is the foundation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ upon which the application section firmly rests.

Priorities of the Christian

Col. 3:1 begins “If, therefore,” which can also be translated “Since, therefore.” Paul is saying, “Since all of the preceding is true, each Christian should do the following.” All of the preceding is the foundation that Paul built showing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Who Jesus Christ is and what He has done is all any believer needs to know in order to walk in a manner worthy of our Lord.

Before getting to the application section for the home, Paul builds an application foundation with several aspects of the Christian walk. First, he gives a general, overarching command for all Christians to have a heavenly focus. In Col 3:1 he states this command by writing “keep seeking the things above” and in Col 3:2 he reiterates this by writing “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Second, he commands all Christians to put to death sexual sin (Col 3:5-7). Third, he gives a list of personal behaviors that Christians must “put off” (Col. 3:8-11). Using a metaphor of clothing, Paul tells Christians that there is a set of clothes that must be removed from the wardrobe and never worn again. This set includes anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and lying. Fourth, Paul commands Christians to “put on” a set of behaviors when they are together with other Christians. These corporate commands to “put on” include putting on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace, the word of Christ, and thankfulness. Paul concludes this list with an all-inclusive “Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).

Putting the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Home

Col. 3:18-4:1 contains several major themes that play a critical role in living a godly family life. These include the Prominence of “Lord,” the Prominence of One Person in Three Relationships, and the Prominence of the Home.

The Prominence of “Lord” in 3:18-4:1

Every passage in the book of Colossians in some way has Jesus Christ as the theme. In fact, the title “Christ” is found twenty-five times in this short Epistle. In addition, the title “Lord” is found sixteen times in the Epistle. Of these sixteen occurrences of “Lord,” nine are found in Col. 3:18-4:1 while “Christ” is only found once as part of the title “Lord Christ.” This concentration of the title “Lord” is unique in the book and, when seen in context, clearly points to the Lordship of Christ as the major theme of the section.

Verse	Subject	Action	With respect to the Lord:
3:18	Wives	Submit	Fitting in the Lord
3:20	Children	Obey parents	Pleasing to the Lord
3:22	Slaves	Obey Masters	Fearing the Lord
3:23	Slaves	Work	As for the Lord
3:24	Slaves	Reward	From the Lord
3:24	Slaves	Serving	Lord Christ whom you serve
4:1	Masters	Grant fairness and justice	Have a Master (Lord) in heaven
3:22; 4:1	Master	N/A	Reference to the slave’s Master used to relate to the Lord Jesus Christ

As can be seen from the above table, the majority of occurrences of “Lord” serve as a reason, or a motivating factor, for the behavior of the individual. Jesus Christ is to be the Lord of wives, children, slaves, and masters!

The Prominence of One Person in Three Relationships

Paul's instruction in this section focuses on three sets of relationships: husbands and wives, parents/father and children, and masters and slaves. The first thing to note is that there is one person who is in each of these three relationships and, in each case, is in the position of authority. That person is the husband and he is referred to as husband, father, and master.

The second thing to note is that there is an ordering in the relationships that shows the priority of each relationship relative to the others. The relationship of the husband and wife stands as the highest priority relationship. The parent and children relationship is secondary to the husband and wife relationship. This ordering is supported in Ephesians 5 where Paul uses the husband and wife, not the parents and children, as the model of the church,. Finally, the master and slave relationship follows in priority to the other relationships.

Thirdly, each relationship defines an authority and submission relationship between the two individuals. The husband is in the position of authority in each relationship. The husband's position of authority is not one where he is commanded to take action. Instead, in each case he is the recipient of submission or obedience from the other side of the relationship. Wives are commanded to submit to their own husband (Col. 3:18). Children are commanded to obey their parents/father (Col. 3:19). Slaves are commanded to obey their master (Col 3:22).

Since all believers are equal before the Lord (Col 3:10-11; Gal. 3:28), subordination does not imply inferiority. The prime example of this is the subordination that occurs within the Godhead. All three persons of the Godhead are equal in essence and being yet fulfill different roles in which some roles are subordinate to others (e.g. Father and Son).

In addition to these relationships, every Christian, in his Christian walk, participates in some form of submission to others. The term most commonly translated submission in the New Testament is "hupotasso" and literally means "to place oneself under." This means that

Christians give authority to someone by placing themselves under that other person's leadership. This situation is seen between citizens and government (Tit. 3:1; Rom. 13:1), employees and employers (Titus 2:9), church members and leaders (1 Cor. 16:16), Christians and fellow Christians (Eph. 5:21), children and parents (1 Tim. 3:4), wives and husbands (Col. 3:18), and slaves and masters (Col. 3:22).

The Prominence of the Home

Each of these relationships occurs within the home and, hence, the home is a prominent theme. At the time that Paul wrote this Epistle, slaves were household slaves. So, all of the instruction in this section finds its application in the home. Since the church also met in the home, a family's walk with the Lord was visible to all fellow believers. This made the application of the qualifications for Elders and Deacons a very practical and reasonable task. It also shows how important this instruction for the home was since the Lord based His qualifications for Church leadership on how well the husband lived his Christian life at home!

Instructions for the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Home

Col. 3:18-19 addresses authority and submission in the marriage relationship. This same authority and submission is also taught in many other New Testament passages (1 Cor. 11:3, 14:34-35; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Tim. 2:11-14). Col. 3:18 instructs wives to "be subject to your husbands" or, literally, "willing arrange yourself under your husband." This term for subject is the same term used to describe Jesus' submission to His parents (Luke 2:51). As previously stated, this submission does not imply inferiority on the part of the wife and is not based on any merit on the part of the husband. The wife is to submit because it is "fitting in the Lord" (3:18). The Lord Jesus Christ is the sole reason for her action. The husband is the recipient because of the role in which Christ has put him. The husband is commanded both to love his wife and not

to be embittered against her. Eph. 5:25 gives a picture of this love, as Paul defines it, as love that is like Christ's love for the church. That love is a sacrificial, willful love. Since the command is in the present tense, this love is to be a continuous, ongoing love. Note also that the command does not say that the wife deserves this love. It is given because Christ commands it. The command not to be embittered means that "Christian husbands are not to become angry or incensed against their wives, either in thought or in word and deed."² Peter writes the following concerning the marriage relationship, "To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:8-9).

In Col. 3:20-21, Paul addresses authority and submission in the relationship between parents and children. This passage has a direct parallel in Eph. 6:1 concerning children of all ages still living at home. The first command is for the children to place themselves under the authority of the parents "in all things" (3:20). As with the wives, the reason is not due to anything deserving about the parents, but rather because it is "well-pleasing to the Lord" (3:20). The parents are the recipients of the children's actions to obey their Lord Jesus Christ. Again, Jesus Christ is the supreme example as He lived so that His Father was well-pleased with Him as a son (Matt. 3:17). Paul instructs the parents, especially the fathers, not to "exasperate" their children because that will lead to them losing heart (3:21). The word "exasperate" signifies to "irritate" either by nagging at them or by deriding their efforts.³ As MacArthur succinctly states it, "stop nagging your kids."⁴

Conclusion

In summary, both wives and children are instructed to place themselves in submissive roles in the home for the sake of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The husband is the recipient of that submission in both cases and the wife joins him in the case of the children. However, it is important to remember that all Christians are equal before the Lord and that these roles are given by the Lord regardless of whether or not the recipient is deserving of submission. In addition, instruction is given to those in authority that will help them effectively carry out their roles. The entirety of this instruction is built upon the solid foundation of two full chapters of who the Lord Jesus Christ is and what He has done to demonstrate and deserve His Lordship plus eighteen verses of personal and relational application that serve to sanctify the walk of any Christian before they even set foot in the home!

Application to Counseling

The flow of this paper can be applied directly to a counseling situation. First, the state of each counselee's salvation cannot be presupposed. It is essential to make a preliminary assessment of each person to determine whether or not he is saved (Col. 1:2). This assessment must be borne out in each person's response to the requirements placed upon him during counseling. If, for example, a counselee is unwilling to repent of obvious sin in his life, he may not be saved. In that case, his salvation might become a major issue in the counseling situation.

Second, if he is saved, it is important to determine if each counselee is living according to the power of his flesh or if he is living in the power provided by Jesus Christ (Col. 1:11). Very little, if any, progress can be made in counseling if a counselee does not yield his life to God and walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). Any progress made will be in the flesh and, hence, most likely

temporary. Also, he will not learn the proper biblical basis for future change if his changes are made in the power of the flesh.

Third, someone once said that the goal of all Christian counseling is to bring the counselee to spiritual maturity. The section of Col. 1:15-3:1 provides an excellent basis for determining some basic information about the counselee's spiritual maturity. If, in any of the areas of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, he has a wrong or incomplete understanding he has not come to a full acceptance of Jesus Christ as his Lord and, therefore, is not fully walking in Him (Col. 2:6).

Once the confirmation of the counselee's walk with the Lord has been established, it can be determined if his basic understanding of the Christian walk means to "set your mind on things above" as Paul commands in Col. 3:1-2. In other words, he may be saved and may have the right basic knowledge in place, but not be walking with a heavenly perspective. This is often easily seen in the general manner in which a person talks about his spiritual life and his problems. If every sentence is earth-bound and full of personal desires, lusts, and expectations with barely a mention of how our sovereign God is above every one of these things, then these verses are not part of his life.

The general commands of Col. 3:1-2 are worked out in detail in Col. 3:5ff. This section of Scripture provides an excellent ground for testing the counselee's understanding of the Scriptural principles of putting off and putting on. Particular areas like the section on immorality may or may not apply to the specific counseling case (Col. 3:5-7). However, every other verse is an essential part of a mature Christian life, and disobedience in any of these areas will certainly be adding to the problems that the counselee brought to the session. The area of immorality must never be ruled out in the case of marriage counseling as it often underlies surface problems and might not come to light in the first few sessions of counseling.

Even though there may be specific counseling issues that need to be dealt with using other parts of Scripture, the section of Colossians dealing with the family is still essential because, if a marriage or family is having problems, there will be some aspect of authority and/or submission under the Lordship of Jesus Christ that is not being lived out properly (i.e. biblically). Another way to say this is that, if the husband, wife, and children are living out all of the instruction of Colossians 3, it would be hard to see them having the kind of problems that would warrant pastoral help!

Depending on whether the problem is between the husband and wife or between the parents and a child (or children), the focus would shift to the appropriate verses in Col. 3:18-21 for that situation. Even though it would be necessary for the counselor to work with other parts of Scripture to support the instruction of Col. 3:18-21, there would still be great benefit in keeping the structure of the biblical approach within Colossians for the bulk of the basic counseling if it was determined that one or more of the counselees was an immature Christian. A simple, yet straight-forward homework assignment of reading the book of Colossians once a day would provide a complete picture, from start to finish, of the entire foundation as well as the specifics to be applied in the counseling situation.

As soon as the counseling discussion turns to authority and submission in the home, the counselor must be prepared to pursue several areas of detailed discussion. The first area of discussion will focus on a working definition and practical implementation of “authority” and “submission.” Very often, each spouse not only does not understand his/her own role but in also has a sinful definition of the other’s role (e.g. submission means she does whatever is asked by the husband!). Secondly, and underlying the first area, will be a biblical discussion of the husband’s role and the wife’s role. The biblical context of authority and submission is a marriage relationship where the individuals are living according to God’s ordained roles for the

husband and wife. Finally, it will often be the case that biblical communication and conflict resolution need to be taught to facilitate a biblical implementation of these principles.

In conclusion, the application of the book of Colossians to marriage and family counseling is not intended to stand as the only biblical source for all counseling situations. However, much of the work of marriage and family counseling pertains to guiding the counselees in implementing the basics of a godly Christian walk into their lives. The family members whose lives honor the Lord do not depend on a few key proof-text verses to keep them focused on the things above. Rather, the individuals whose lives honor the Lord know, understand, and live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the home. Each individual works to “put off” and “put on” those things necessary to walk by the Spirit in addition to living out the responsibilities called for in the God-ordained family roles of husband, wife, and child.

NOTES

1. Tom W. Smith, *Changes in Families and Family Values* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1997), 17-18.
2. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998, Logos Research Systems, Inc.
3. Ibid.
4. John F. MacArthur, *Colossians: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1992, Logos Research Systems, Inc.