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Wives, Children, and Slaves: The Bible Meets the 21st Century

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Vision for Life: Seeing the Big Picture (Colossians) Series

Colossians 3:18-4:1

The *New York Times* recently ran an article by a Brooklyn woman named, Michele Somerville, who grew up Irish Catholic. She is a woman a few years younger than me. She turned away from the church in the early 1970's when she inquired about being an altar server. At that time she was advised that only boys could serve. The priest said that the only time a woman could approach the altar was when she became a bride. And when Michele's mother became critically ill at age 30, a Catholic priest, who was administering Last Rites, refused to offer absolution to Michele's mother when she, who had given birth to four children, refused to express contrition for taking birth control pills.

But in the last decade, Michele has made her way back to the Catholic Church. What struck me about the article was that she made her way back to the church on her own terms. She said:

I quickly developed a sense of what I did and did not want in a church. I wanted to have a transcendent experience, but as the mother of three toddlers, I also wanted convenience.

She auditioned a number of churches and she said:

I had zero tolerance for folk masses, anti-abortion talks, rote reciters of scripture, and congregants who refused to sing. When people are unkind to my well-mannered children, I cross that church off my list. I prefer my preachers to be witty, lyrical, and learned.

Michele then went on to list about a dozen other things that she wanted and did not want in a church. She is a strong supporter of gay rights and the ordination of homosexual priests and nuns. She is a strong supporter of abortion. She withholds her money from church, and, instead gives it to a survivors' network of those abused by priests.

Michele represents a very common outlook towards both the church and scripture.

The progressive, liberal approach

What really struck me about Michele's article was that at no point did she ever say, "I do not like with this or that teaching of the Catholic Church, or this or that doctrine in the Bible, but I submit, I yield to an authority greater than myself." I

think Michele speaks for millions of 21st century Americans whose ultimate authority in life is not what the church teaches, even less what the Bible teaches, but rather, “what I personally feel about the matter.”

In the progressive, liberal tradition, I am my own God.

Well, at the complete opposite end of the spectrum we have:

The traditionalist, fundamentalist approach

The traditionalist, fundamentalist approach is seen on bumper stickers of folks’ cars that say, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or to simplify it by the old Nike ad, “Just do it.” If the Bible says it, you just do it. You don’t question it. You don’t interpret it. Just obey it.

Now, for a lot of folks – maybe some of you would say, “Yes, that’s right.” In fact, you might have one of those bumper stickers on your car.

But there are two problems with the traditionalist, fundamentalist approach. The first problem is that fundamentalists really don’t mean what they say. At least, the vast majority of traditionalist fundamentalists don’t just do it. For example, five times in the New Testament, the writer tells us to greet each other in church with a holy kiss. How long do you think you would last in a 21st century fundamentalist church if you just walked up to a stranger and kissed them on the face and you became known as “the kissing guy” or the “kissing woman.” Watch out! Here comes Kissing Ken, or Kissing Connie. Women would head for the restrooms. Men would head for their guns.

There is any number of bible texts that we don’t just do. If you are not a vegetarian, do you refuse to eat meat that has blood in it? Of course, the Bible in numerous places tells us to not eat meat with blood. And it is repeated again in the New Testament.

Just do it? The New Testament says that women should cover their hair. And it says that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace. And Jesus tells us that we should wash each other’s feet. When is the last time you washed someone’s feet?

This all leads to the second problem of the traditionalist, fundamentalist approach – that is that we all, of course, interpret the Bible. Nobody just reads it flat – nobody. We very reasonably say, “Well, this business about the holy kiss was a 1st century way of communicating that you Christians are now family together. So you ought to be greeting one another with a 1st century custom of warmth and welcome.” In 21st century America we say, “You don’t necessarily have to kiss one another. That is not the way we Americans greet, but we do hug each other; we could shake each other’s hand; we could certainly smile at each other.”

And the business about not eating meat with blood, well, that's mentioned in the book of Acts because that was a Jewish prohibition from the Old Testament and the church was very concerned about not culturally offending the many Jewish people in their midst. We would culturally translate that in the 21st century and say if we had a lot of Jewish people or a lot of Muslims coming to a party, we would not serve pork. We might make sure our food was kosher or Hallal. And if we lived in the Middle East we would not have alcohol in our house.

But we look for the point of the command and we say, "The point of the command is not to forever forbid people from eating meat with blood, the point is don't unnecessarily offend someone with what you eat or drink."

The vast, vast majority of Christians who hold onto the authority of the Bible go through some sort of process of interpretation in which we take the cultural husk off, the cultural shell off of the scripture and we say how do we preserve the trans-cultural kernel, how do we take what is being said in an entirely different 1st century cultural context and apply it to our lives in an urban, post-enlightenment, democratic society of 21st century America.

The text that we are reading today is one of those texts that we absolutely have to translate for 21st century readers because the text today says things like, "Wives submit to your husbands." What does that mean?

If that doesn't make us squirm enough in the 21st century, the text goes on and says, "Slaves, obey your masters."

Can we really say these two things to 21st century folks? How do we avoid Michele's trap of just setting up Michele as the authority and say, "Well, I like this and I don't like that. Ultimately I become my own God," or the traditionalist, fundamentalist trap which says, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." when it may be cruel to just do it in the 21st century. And if we just did it, we would be stepping on so many other basic teachings regarding human dignity and the protection of the weak.

So we are going to tackle a very tough text in the book of Colossians today in a talk that I've titled "Wives, Children, and Slaves: The Bible Meets the 21st Century." Let's pray.

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence

for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Those who do wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. 4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

So the text here immediately runs smack into the 21st century with the opening words:

Colossians 3:18

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

You say, "Well, what's the big deal?" Let's imagine that don't spend your entire life inside a church building, but you venture out to a place like Boston, Mass, or New York City, or Los Angeles. You are talking with one of the female professors at Ohio State. She teaches in the Women's Studies department, or the English department or the Social Work school and she is interested in God. She is interested in restoring a relationship with God. She says, "You know, my husband and I have an egalitarian marriage. We support each other's goals; share household chores; neither of us has the final say. Is that okay? Can I live this way and be a Christian in good standing at your church?"

You say, 'Sure! It sounds like you have things really clicking in your marriage. That's great!' Or do you say, "I've got to be honest with you. If you were to become a Christian you would have to radically change your marriage. Well, you know the problem with contemporary marriage is un-submissive women. We just have too many women who are trying to be men and have all these independent opinions. The Bible teaches that the problem in America is that we don't have Christian marriages in which the men is the king of his castle and he has the final say when push comes to shove. I think your egalitarian marriage is sub-Christian. You need to subordinate yourself and your interests and your personality and your talents to serve your husband so that he would have an enjoyable life and be able to benevolently and lovingly rule your home."

You think I am drawing an unfair caricature? I've had women sit in my office and say to me, "Whenever I get into a dispute with my husband, he opens up the Bible and he says to me that I am not submissive. He reminds me of my duty to subordinate myself and my opinion to him and that he is the final decision maker in our home."

But let's leave marriage aside for a moment and tackle the slavery text. A woman named Laxmi Swami comes to you and says, "I am trying to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Someone gave me a Bible and I read this passage in the book of Colossians which says:

Colossians Col 3:22

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

Is that what's required of me? Or am I allowed to run away from my master?"

And she tells you this story which by the way is an absolutely true story. Laxmi Swami was born in India. She came to England via Kuwait. She is a servant to two sisters of the Emir of Kuwait. The princesses regularly spend six months of the year in Central London and they take their servants with them. They subject these women, including Laxmi, to extreme cruelty – both physical and mental. Laxmi is regularly beaten with a broomstick or a knotted electrical cord, or a horsewhip. Laxmi's eyes were damaged when they threw keys in her face. They yanked out two of her gold teeth. They also told her that one of her four children had been killed in a motorcycle accident and they beat her when she broke down and cried. It was only years later that she discovered that her son was not killed in a motorcycle accident, but was very much alive.

In London, the princesses frequently go out at 8:00 p.m. and they return home at 2:00-3:00 a.m. While they are away, Laxmi is forced to stand by the door exactly where they left her. On their return she has to massage their hands and feet. If they are in a bad mood, she has to suffer their kicks and punches. She is allowed to sleep barely for two hours a night on the floor outside of the locked kitchen. She drinks forbidden tap water from the bathtub. Laxmi says that she is always hungry and is often denied food for days at a time. There is plenty of food, but it is thrown into the trash deliberately so that it spoils and Laxmi can't eat it.

Laxmi asks you as a Christian a very simple, heart-felt question: Would it be okay if I ran away from these women, or reported them to the authorities, or should I just do what Colossians 3:22 says, "Obey your masters in everything."

Do you say to Laxmi, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it. Just do it."? You must obey your masters in everything. Or do you say, "My heart is broken. I will help you to escape the unbelievably harsh and inhumane treatment that you are receiving at the hands of your employers."

The story of Laxmi, by the way, and many similar stories are found in one of the most powerful books I've read in years. It is titled *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* by Kevin Bales. Kevin Bales is the director of Free the Slaves. He is said to be the world's leading expert on contemporary slavery. It is hard to believe, but in the U.S. farm workers have been found locked inside of barracks and working under armed guard as field slaves. Women from Thailand and the Philippines have been freed from brothels and in New York and Seattle and Los Angeles where they were enslaved as prostitutes.

In the Caribbean Haitian slaves work in sugarcane fields in the dark to produce sugar that may go in your iced tea. Most of the oriental rugs sold in India are made by child slaves. Thousands of girls are given to priests to serve as sex slaves in India. And millions of boys and girls are enslaved in India to pay off the debts of their parents. There are hundreds of thousands of girls sold to brothels in Thailand and Cambodia. Slaves produce charcoal in Brazil which is crucial to making steel that goes into Brazilian made cars and parts that are then exported to the U.S.

How do we read the Bible here at the Vineyard? Do we say to slaves around the world, your job is to obey your masters? There are many rules for interpreting the Bible.

The Vineyard approach

If you are really interested in learning more about this, you might consider signing up for an amazing program we have here titled Vineyard Leadership Institute (VLI). VLI takes a person through the entire Bible in two years. Dr. Steve Robbins, who oversees the program, has a whole course in how to properly interpret the scripture. You can find out more about VLI by going online at www.vli.org. You could also get in touch with Dr. Steve Robbins here at the church at Steve.robbins@vineyardcolumbus.org or 614.890.0000.

But let me offer you just three rules for how we at the Vineyard interpret the Bible.

The Bible should be interpreted according to our stance as empowered evangelicals.

I wrote a book, along with a friend of mine, Ken Wilson, about 14 years ago that has just recently come out again in a revised edition. It is called *Empowered Evangelicals*. “Empowered Evangelicals” was a term I coined to describe what we were trying to do in the Vineyard in creating a church that held strongly to the Word of God and also pursued the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The evangelical portion of Empowered Evangelicals means that we Vineyard people can never say, “Well, this writer in the Bible says such and such, but I disagree. I’m going to pick and choose what Bible texts which I obey and which I don’t. The Bible is a smorgasbord. I think that Christians should be free to believe something or do something contrary to the Bible.” In other words, I have discovered what I believe to be the intention of the writer of scripture, but I don’t like it, so I’m not going to do it.

Vineyard people can never say that. When we discover the intention of the biblical writer, we are committed to obey the text. We are empowered evangelicals. That means that we always are committed to pursuing the mind and heart of the Holy Spirit. We understand here at the Vineyard that the Bible is

not a rule book. It doesn't give us detailed instructions that answer every question that we wish to have answered.

One of the reasons it is so hard to raise children in the 21st century is because there is no rule book. What I think most of us as parents want is a set of rules answering all of life's parenting questions. When is it okay to date? When you are 16 or when you are 18? Or should I wait to until my son or daughter is in their 40's, and I must come along on a date to chaperone? Where should my child go to school? Should they go to a Christian school, be homeschooled, or go to public schools? Which Christian school? What do you do if the school is teaching something you don't agree with?

We are Empowered Evangelicals meaning that there is no one size fits all approach to all of life's questions. We understand here at the Vineyard that each of us needs to develop our own relationship with God and be led by the Holy Spirit individually in areas that are not clearly defined by scripture: What time should we put our kids to bed? What shows should we allow them to watch? How many activities should a child be involved in? These are things that we don't read about in the Bible and we need to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Second:

The Bible should be interpreted in ways that will promote the spread of the gospel.

For the apostle Paul, social roles – the way that men relate to women; the way that Jews relate to Gentiles; the way that slaves relate to their masters – all of those things are subordinated to his overriding goal that people would come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. For Paul, social roles are secondary. The issue is what will promote the spread of the gospel so that people will be saved and come into a relationship with Christ and receive eternal life. Paul tells us that this is his goal over and over again. For example:

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

It doesn't matter so much for Paul how you organize your marriage, or how you organize the workplace, or what form of government you have. For the apostle Paul, the fundamental and ultimate issue is: Christian, are you acting in a way that promotes the gospel, or hinders the spread of the gospel?

It is absolutely the case that Paul frequently calls upon Christians to sacrifice their personal interests and their personal preferences for the sake of winning other people.

In the 1st century Christians were a tiny, tiny minority in this huge and powerful Roman Empire. They were living in a society that knew nothing about Jesus, nothing about his love, nothing about his self-sacrifice, nothing about his death on the cross, nothing about his resurrection, nothing about his Spirit, nothing about his teaching. And they wanted to commend this person Jesus to the rest of society. How should they act?

You need to understand that in the 1st century Roman Empire about 1/3 of the people were slaves. For Christians to come out and say that slavery is wrong and we're encouraging a slave rebellion would mean that Christians would have been strangled in the cradle. The Roman government would have crushed it. Likewise, the Roman Empire was entirely male-dominated. Men were said to be lords and kings of their households. If Paul said to Christian women, "Listen, throw off male domination in your home. You are liberated in Christ, forget all the prevailing social rules, there would have been no change for the message of Christ's saving love to have been granted a hearing." For Paul there was one objective – the promotion of the gospel.

Paul was a wise missionary. He sensitively tailored his counsel to fit the culture and situation he was in. We need to do the same. The counsel we might give concerning marriage to a couple living in Columbus, Ohio or Boston, or New York in the 21st century might be very different than the counsel we would give to a married couple who was moving to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia and wished to be missionaries there. In both cases, our goal is the same – to lift up Christ; to promote Christ's interests. But the way we go about doing that might be very different. In Pakistan or Saudi Arabia we would certainly tell the woman to cover her head. We might advise her to never go out unescorted, to make sure that when she is out in the streets that she never looks a man in the eye. We might say you must go into an inner room when a man comes over to visit your husband. If she didn't do these things, she would bring shame and scandal to her family and the people there would reject the message of Christ. We would say none of those things to a woman living in 21st century America. Indeed, an obviously male-dominated marriage might turn off many 21st century Americans in considering the claims of Christ.

So we at the Vineyard follow apostolic practice of making sure that we interpret the Bible in ways that will promote the spread of the gospel.

And finally:

The Bible should be interpreted with an eye to the coming kingdom of God.

You know, read flatly with a traditionalist, fundamentalist approach to scripture – just do it, it is very possible to justify one human being owning another human being. Many Southerners before the Civil War, and indeed, many Northerners argued with the abolitionists who said slavery was not God's will, that slavery was a sin. They said they were being unbiblical. After all, these Southern and Northern traditionalist fundamentalists said that the patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, all had slaves. Slavery appears in the Ten Commandments. We are not to covet our neighbor's slave. Slavery is never abolished in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul tells slaves to obey their masters. Peter says the same thing. Indeed, Peter tells slaves to endure beatings without complaint.

1 Peter 2:18-20

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. 19 For it is commendable if you bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because you are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

But the abolitionists said, "No. God never intended the 1st century social order to be his ultimate. His ultimate is the Kingdom of God." In God's ultimate kingdom, no human being owns another human being. Because we are all made in the image of God. No one person has to permanently be under another person, or serve another person. God's kingdom is a kingdom of liberty. God's kingdom of freedom.

So we in the Vineyard always ask the question: What is God's ultimate? What is the kingdom of God like? What will the world be like when Christ returns and sets up his kingdom here on earth? When we pray "Your kingdom come," what are we praying? We are saying, "God, bring your reign into this world in such a way that cancer is healed. God, bring your reign into the world in such a way that marriages are reconciled. Bring your reign into this world so that hungry people are fed and thirsty people are given clean water. And children are loved and protected and not sold into prostitution. God we want to taste something of your ultimate purpose for humanity." We read the Bible according to God's ultimate intention in the kingdom of God.

So let's look at the texts quickly and individually. When we strip away the 1st century shell and try to preserve the trans-cultural, eternal kernel, reading the Bible as empowered evangelicals, I come to the Bible with a commitment to yield myself to the Bible, to not substitute my opinions for the Bible's opinions, understanding that it is not a rule book, and I read it with wisdom regarding what will promote the gospel this time, at this hour, in this place, what is God's ultimate, what will most closely resemble the Kingdom of God, because I want to reach for that, what do we discover?

First of all:

We discover that all of life is to be Christ-centered.

Seven times in these nine verses Paul explicitly refers to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life.

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Those who do wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. 1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Social roles are secondary. What is primary is your identity as a Christian. The most important thing that can be said about you is not that you are married or single, divorced or widowed, that you have a doctorate or a college degree or dropped out of high school, that you work in this or that job, or even that you are a man or a woman. The most important thing that can be said about you is that Christ is in your life. No identity is more important than this – I am a child of God. I belong to Christ. I was bought with the price of Christ's blood. Nothing is more important to me than the fact that I know Christ! Christ is at the center of all of my life.

Let me ask you a question. Can you say this about yourself: "My primary identity is I am a follower of Christ"? Is that who you are?

So, Paul next speaks about the three relationships in life that would have been part of the 1st century home – wives and husbands, children and parents, and

slaves and masters. He says, remember center yourself on Christ. Here is the second principle we draw.

We discover we are to sacrifice ourselves for each other.

Colossians 3:18-19

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19
Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Now, some people take a more traditional view of Colossians 3:18. They say that Paul wasn't simply telling women to observe the culturally approved role that they had in the 1st century in order to promote the gospel. They say that this is a permanent injunction for all wives everywhere at all times, that wives are to order themselves under their husbands.

I have no difficulty with any of you who choose to have a more traditional understanding so long as no wife is made to feel inferior to her husband in her marriage. I have no problem with a traditional understanding so long as no woman gets the idea that if she criticizes her husband, she is being un-submissive. I have no problem with the traditional understanding so long as no woman ever feels that she is not able to fully use all of her gifts and all of her intelligence in her marriage. I have no difficulty with a traditional view of marriage so long as no woman is ever inclined to become passive or lose her creative energy. And I have no difficulty with a traditional view of marriage so long as no woman ever submits to physical or sexual or verbal or emotional abuse believing that this is God's will for her.

If a woman says, "My understanding of what submission means is to embrace my husband's leadership in a way that doesn't in any way crush me or demean my intelligence or creativity or calling or gifting," I have no problem with such a marital relationship. I know that in marriage, as in child-raising, one size doesn't fit all. We're all different. I lean towards a more egalitarian perspective in marriage. I lean towards the view that says that both husband and wife are to mutually sacrifice, mutually serve and mutually support each other. If you are interested in finding out more about a more egalitarian perspective, we have a wonderful book available at the bookstore titled *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*. I don't believe that men can become women, or that women can become men. We are not the same. But we can mutually support each other in our differences. One of the words that really convicts me as a husband is a word that the apostle Paul uses in Colossians 3:19:

Colossians 3:19

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

The Greek word for love is “Agapao.” It is a command: “You love!” Paul says the same thing three times in Ephesians: “Husbands, love your wives!” “Husbands, love your wives!” “Husbands, love your wives!”

Agapao is a distinctively Christian word. It speaks about the kind of sacrificial self-giving love that we find in Jesus Christ himself. When all of the philosophers in the ancient world wrote their household codes they instructed husbands and wives regarding how to order their relationship; who was leader and who was follower. But as the Bible scholar William Barclay tells us, no where other than in the New Testament in places like Colossians 3:19 and Ephesians 5 do we ever read the instruction: Husbands, agapao – love your wife with a self-sacrificial love. All the other household codes said, “Husband, rule your wife; husbands, govern your wives.” Only here do we have this revolutionary statement: Husbands, lay your life down for your wife. Sacrifice your rights for your wife. Sacrifice your personal interests for your wife. Husbands, serve your wives. Don’t just be self-serving; you serve your wife. Be a blessing to your wife. Be a strength to your wife. Be a support to your wife. Be an encouragement to your wife. The test of your quality as a husband is to ask, “Is your wife flourishing?” “Is she growing? “Is she thriving because you love her so well?”

And wives, do the same with your husbands. The third principle in this text:

We discover that we are to strengthen and encourage each other.

Colossians 3:20-21

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21
Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

You say, “Where is the 1st century husk in this passage?” This is advice we would give straight up in the 21st century. It seems obvious that children are to obey their parents. But understand, in the 1st century, a child’s obedience to his or her father was not restricted to the time when that child was a young child. A child’s obedience extended throughout life. In ancient Rome fathers literally held the power of life and death over their children. Many fathers put their daughters out on the street as infants because they didn’t want a girl. Infanticide was not a crime in ancient Rome. You could kill your children. Parents picked the spouses for their children. They arranged marriages to which their children were expected to be obedient. Parents picked the occupations for their sons and their sons were expected to be obedient to that.

So even in “children obey your parents,” we translate that a different way in the 21st century. We say, “Well, that applies to young children; not old children.”

Colossians 3:20

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

What is this saying? It is saying, “Fathers and mothers, it is right for you to expect your children, especially when they are young, to obey you in everything that is not sin. Children should not be the judges of what they should or should not obey. And they shouldn’t obey just when their parents are around. In fact, it is essential that you teach your children to obey you as their parents.” The mark of a society in collapse, Paul tells us in Romans 1, is that children are disobedient to parents.

“But you parents,” he says, “make sure that you don’t just irritate or provoke your children by having such an inflexible attitude, being so domineering, so oppressive, so demanding that your child, at least inside, throws up their hands and says, ‘Forget it. Nothing that I do will ever be enough. Forget it. It doesn’t matter what I say, or how reasonable my position is, my father or mother never gives ground. They don’t understand me.’”

Don’t, by an overly exacting attitude because you are in charge, don’t provoke in your child a broken spirit in which they say, “Nothing that I do will ever be good enough, so why do I even bother?” Or likely when they get older, they just act out in active rebellion. My father or mother is so stern; it is their way or the highway. We can’t talk; they don’t understand; they will not listen. So I might as well kick away and rebel against their straightjacket rules.

Fathers, mothers, your children need to experience not just your disapproval and your frown, but also your approval and your smile. Your children need not only your words, but your ear. They need not only your rules, but your relationship. They need not only your toughness, but also your tenderness.

And finally:

We discover that Christ makes all things new.

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Those who do wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. 1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

So we don’t simplistically tell folks that you just need to obey your master in a situation where we could provide freedom. The Christian faith is not just a struggling small sect, but where we Christians have real influence. We speak up and we say, “It is sin for one human being to own another.”

Still, there are some principles in this text that apply in the 21st century. What do I mean that Christ makes all things new? Paul tells us in Colossians 3:22:

Colossians 3:22

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

For the Christian we have a new standard. Paul says “obey not only when their eye is on you to win their favor,” – the Greek is literally translated “eye service”-work that is done only when the boss is looking. You know what “eye service” is, don’t you? You know, in gym class in high school when the gym teacher walked in, you get down and start doing your pushups. He turns his back and you get up and start talking with your friends. You know what eye service is. The boss comes in and switch out of eBay or watching a YouTube video. You are hard at work. Eye service.

The Christian sect called “The Shakers” really understood this one. Among other things, the Shakers were expert furniture makers. What folks have discovered is that the back of Shaker furniture, the part that was against the wall, that no one ever saw, was made with as much craftsmanship and care as the front part of the furniture. The undersides of the chairs were finished with as much care as the top of the chairs. The Shakers didn’t just render eye service. They had a new standard, as believers, because they served a new boss. Look at this with me in Colossians 3:22-24:

Colossians 3:22-24

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

How might this apply in the 21st century? In this Christ-centered world the apostle Paul is saying that if you are unhappy with your boss, if you feel like your boss is incompetent or unfair, or unappreciative, or ungrateful, then go to work for a new boss. Four times in these verses Paul tells us that as a Christian, our boss is Jesus Christ. Life is so wonderful when you work for a great boss. No matter how wonderful your boss is, you couldn’t work for a better boss than Jesus Christ. Don’t go to work for your customers. Don’t go to work for your fellow employees. Don’t just work for your employer. Certainly don’t work for yourself or your professor, or your coach, or your family. The best boss you could ever work for, the one who will provide you with the most joy and fulfillment and satisfaction in life is Jesus. Go to work for Jesus.

What does that look like in practice? Let me finish with this thought.

You wake up in the morning and before you get out of bed you say, “Jesus, you are the one who made me alive today. The reason I just drew this breath is because you allowed me to live another day. Jesus, I want to work for you. Jesus, today I want to serve you. Enable me to do that through the words that I say to others; through the attitudes that I display. Let everything in my life be submitted to you.

When you are in the shower and you are mulling over your day, “Jesus, I need to make a dozen decisions. But I want to submit them to you because you are my boss. Because I’m a Christian, I’ve given you the right to call the shots in my life. Here are the people I’m going to interact with. Jesus, you are the boss, bless those interactions. Give me wisdom to know what to do, what to say, how to strategize.” When you get to work, and you know that Jesus is your boss, that he is looking over your work, that he is examining it, then you are not shirking your responsibilities. You are not just fooling around at work, or stealing company time. You work with honesty and integrity. You are officially working for Christ. Because you are working for Christ, you have a sense of meaning and blessing no matter what work you are doing. You are doing it unto the Lord. You have the same old job, but you have a new standard for a new boss.

We Christians are people who are always yielding ourselves to the authority of God’s Word, seeking God’s Spirit for how to apply his word, desiring that in all we do we promote the gospel, making Jesus attractive, reaching for the coming Kingdom. We say to Jesus, “We want more of your reign and rule in my life this day. You are my example, my Lord, my everything, my boss.” Let’s pray.

Wives, Children, and Slaves: The Bible Meets the 21st Century

Rich Nathan

July 11-12, 2009

Vision for Life: Seeing the Big Picture (Colossians) Series

Colossians 3:18-4:1

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- A. The progressive, liberal approach
- B. The traditionalist, fundamentalist approach
- C. The Vineyard approach
 - 1. The Bible should be interpreted according to our stance as empowered evangelicals
 - 2. The Bible should be interpreted in ways that will promote the spread of the gospel
 - 3. The Bible should be interpreted with an eye to the coming Kingdom of God

II. Several principles from the Bible

- A. We discover that all of life is to be Christ-centered (Colossians 3:18-4:1)
- B. We discover that we are to sacrifice ourselves for each other (Colossians 3:18-19)
- C. We discover that we are to strengthen and encourage each other (Colossians 3:20-21)
- D. We discover that Christ makes all things new (Colossians 3:22–4:1)