

It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

—Colossians 3:24, NIV

You know that you also have a Master in heaven.

—Colossians 4:1, NIV

## LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand that our closest relationships should be impacted by our spiritual beliefs and that they, in turn, impact our ability to share the gospel.
2. To see our role as believers within our surrounding culture and to push back against injustices, for the sake of the gospel.
3. To become more aware of opportunities for intentional, grace-filled conversations about the mystery of Christ, the gospel.

## REFLECTION

“Instructions for Christian Households” is the title affixed to the first part of this section of Scripture, as well as the parallel section in Ephesians 5 and 6, by the NIV editors, and rightly so. It is a concise enough passage to quote here:

Wives, submit yourselves 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 embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

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. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

—Colossians 3:18–4:1

The language is clear, the instruction is practical and seems to be wise, and the passage is repeated, with some extra clarifying language, in another letter attributed to Paul. So what is the benefit of spending a week of this study on these “household codes”? I must admit, I had something of that attitude as I began to prepare for this lesson, and it took some softening of my heart by the LORD before I could attempt it with a clear conscience. So, if you’re starting out with anything near that same attitude, I recommend that you spend some time alone with your Creator before taking on this assignment!

How should twenty-first century Americans who are (at least relatively) wealthy, enlightened and free read these first century instructions to Hellenic households of new believers living in Asia Minor? We could gloss over them and be convinced that Paul was reinforcing and affirming the strongly patriarchal structures we assume he was familiar with, or we can reject them as meaningless and irrelevant to today’s culture. I would propose that there are at least a couple of other ways to read and interpret this passage.

First, we should note that the instructions center around the father figure, the *paterfamilias* of the Greek culture household. The father, as the traditional head of household, was responsible for the physical, spiritual and economic well-being of them

all. He held absolute authority; in fact, the wife, children and slaves were not viewed as equal beings. They were assets to the household, useful to enhance the economic well-being of the family business or farm. The household's income was not assumed to come from an employer outside the home; it was generated from within, utilizing the assets the business owner, the father, could acquire.

Into this culture, the gospel breaks in, declaring reconciliation and love and grace for all—"Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free" (3:11). With so many of the old rules and customs being dislodged, how does a household of believers go forward? How do they conduct their family business and what do their ongoing relationships look like as they live out the admonishment of verse 17: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him"? How does their lifestyle impact their witness to a predominantly Gentile world?

One way to read this text is as instruction for redeeming the culture. Recognizing that spiritual liberation does not immediately transfer to social and political liberation, especially where the believers are in a distinct minority, "special guidelines were needed for the mutual treatment of believing masters—plus the master's wife and children—and believing slaves in the same household so that they would live together as a household in Christ, a kind of domestic church" (Gorman, 490). These guidelines are not rejecting liberation nor codifying these relationships (especially slavery), but are redeeming them, emphasizing the mutuality of the responsibilities for all parties.

This would represent a significant shift in thinking for most, especially the fathers. They are admonished to use restraint rather than force, to "not be harsh," to "not embitter," to provide "what is right and fair." A community of believers built up from households operating in this manner would be living "in the world but not of the world." These households would be well positioned to start out on the trajectory toward a more free and just society for all citizens, basing their rights and responsibilities on the imperative to "forgive as the Lord forgave you" (3:13).

Another perspective from which to view these "household codes" is the missional one. With no trained clergy and a short supply of gifted evangelists, the primary bearers of

the gospel to Colossae would be these liberated households of believers. Their lives must be holy (3:5–10) because they are “holy and dearly loved,” letting “the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another.” Living within their culture, the household churches “will grow as husbands and wives convert their spouses, parents introduce children into the faith, and members introduce relatives and friends to the assembly. The openness of the assembly to outsiders provided an opportunity for evangelism, and the moral conduct of the believers attracted outsiders to accept the gospel” (Thompson, 170).

The manner in which the households, these family businesses, were operated could not be offensive or chaotic or self-destructive without negatively impacting the sharing of the gospel. This was an important “part of the early Christian missionary strategy. If Christians who had changed their gods still maintained order in the household according to the best values of the culture, then they would decrease the hostility of their pagan neighbors and perhaps encourage them to convert” (Talbert, 138). For the sake of the gospel, these new believers must live within their cultural norms while offering a counter-cultural perspective on each of the household relationships, bearing with each other and forgiving each other, because they are all forgiven. Elsewhere Paul writes, “On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (I Corinthians 9:12).

Neither of these perspectives, therefore, allows us to abuse Paul as a misogynist or slavery proponent. Rather than a keeper of the status quo, Paul is giving believers a game plan for effectively sharing the gospel, which is always his top priority. Living in redeemed households of faith, being the church, is powerful testimony to the power of the Spirit of God. He is not schizophrenic or rambling in this letter of instruction. Following up on the instructions for personal holiness and conduct (3:1–17), these admonishments regarding the Colossian believers’ daily relationships will enhance and validate their testimony. These “household codes” should be viewed as an integral part of the master plan of evangelism from the master evangelist himself.

## LESSON PLAN

### 1. Engage

- a. Review Lesson 12: Colossians 3:1–17.
- b. Introduce the subject of Lesson 13.
  - i. What did the household you were raised in look like? Who made the rules? Who provided income? Who provided spiritual leadership?
  - ii. How did you view households that were significantly different (in size, or traditions, or roles, or rules) from your own?

### 2. Involve

- a. Read Colossians 3:18–4:1.
  - i. What do you notice about these instructions?
  - ii. What groups or roles are surprisingly included or excluded from this list?
  - iii. You will want to review the corresponding passage in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. Many of us are likely more familiar with the Ephesians passage. What similarities do you see between today's Colossians passage and this section of Ephesians? What differences?
  - iv. Regarding wives and husbands, what is involved in "submission"?
  - v. Regarding children and fathers (parents), how do you balance the responsibilities to teach and discipline children without "embittering" or "discouraging" them? Is this an ongoing responsibility, or do we "age out" of this relationship? What are your biggest challenges in this relationship?
  - vi. Slaves, as utilized in this Hellenistic culture, were considered to be members of the household, the family business enterprise which provided for all. Households tended to act together, even to come to belief together (see Acts 11:11–17; 16:14–15, 31–34). What challenges would have been introduced into a master-slave relationship when one or both of them accepted God's grace through the gospel? The follow-up letter to Philemon seems to shed some light on one of those relationships.

- vii. Viewed as a redeeming of the culture, how do these instructions differ from a completely patriarchal and authoritarian view of the household? How do they differ from a completely egalitarian & chaotic view of the household? How would these new “norms” allow a Christian household to function within a pagan culture?
  - viii. Viewed from a missional perspective, how do these instructions impact a Christian household’s ability to share the gospel? Which group(s) would be most challenged to live out these instructions post-conversion? What would keep a slave from expressing their new “freedom in Christ” by escaping? What should a master do with a captured runaway slave? (Spoiler alert—Philemon preview!)
- b. Read Colossians 4:2–6.
- i. This summary paragraph gives more insight to the instructions above. What does Paul ask these believers to be praying about for him? That God may open doors and that he will proclaim the gospel, the mystery of Christ, clearly! Paul’s eyes are set on his mission, the declaring of the gospel!
  - ii. Declaring the gospel means intentional conversations with “outsiders.” What components does Paul encourage in these conversations?

### 3. Challenge

- a. Review your conversations over the past week, both within your household and with outsiders. What percentage of these were “missional”?
- b. How do we move past the “casual” and “surface” nature of our conversations toward “making the most of every opportunity” to share the gospel?
- c. In applying the “household codes” to our culture, how can our closest relationships with insiders, within our family or business or even church, enhance our ability to witness to an unbelieving culture? How could they damage our witness?
- d. Continuing the trajectory toward a free and just society, what would Paul’s “household codes” look like for us today?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.