

# *All the Days of Our Lives*

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ June 4, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



**18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.**

**20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not with a slavery performed merely for looks, to please people, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever task you must do, work as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord and not for humans, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.**

**1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven. (Colossians 3:18-4:1, NRSV)**



During my first year at Whitworth College, I was encouraged to take a class by advisors called “Interpersonal Relationships”. They said it was a great class and a good foundation for any future career path in which you might be working with people (isn’t that most career paths?). Ron Pyle, the instructor, started off the semester with these words and he wrote them on the board. He said to the class:

*Write this down: **The quality of your life depends more than anything else on the quality of your relationships.***

Depending on how you look at that statement, it will be either obvious, or it will be transformational. Sure, you might say, that makes so much sense it doesn’t even need to be said. But on the other hand, I’m willing to bet every person in the room can think of a relationship that is not where you want it to be.

When we listen to God’s Word, our tendency is to ask questions like:

How will this word impact my relationship with God?

How will it make my following more faithful?  
How will it make my believing bolder?  
How will it make my devotion more devout?  
How will it make me more godly? Right?

But we don’t always start by asking how it will impact our closest relationships. Today’s passage doesn’t give us much of a choice.

Jesus simplifies all of the laws of scripture into just two: Love God with everything you possess, and love others. We’ve compartmentalized our relationship with God into our Bible-reading time and our going-to-church time. But help for our relationships we’ve sought out everywhere else. There’s no shortage of resources at our disposal in self-help websites, group therapy, podcasts, books, and social media.

This morning, Paul is essentially talking about all of our closest relationships, not just those with our significant other (which I just found out is called an S.O. Does that make all other relationships I.O.’s - insignificant others?). Course not.

All of our relationships are significant, and they affect the overall quality of our lives. And here’s the point Paul is making to the Colossian church:

**Your God-life is woven together with your relationship-life. They are not two separate pieces of your overall life.**

Now remember, these followers of Jesus gathered in Colossae were new at this – just like the Ephesians, the Galatians, the Romans, and the Corinthians. They were all still grappling with this big news of God showing up as a human – news that changes the way they live out their lives with God. As for the Jewish people that were there – they had previously wrapped up their whole religion into rituals and festivals and sacrifices, and let the priests take care of most of the spiritual practices on their behalf. Now, they were on the hook to model *all* of their lives after Jesus, including every relationship. This from just one chapter back (Colossians 2):

*<sup>6</sup> So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him...*

*\* See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition... rather than on Christ.*

It would have been so tempting to default back to the old way of human tradition. Now, they had to learn to live a life in which, before everything they do, they would have to ask: *What does Jesus want here?* Verse 23, right in the middle of our passage today:

*Whatever task you must do, work as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord.*

And so, it includes every one of our relationships as well. For every relationship we have to ask, “How can I reflect Jesus’ kind of love to this person?” Paul could have included other relationships - neighbors, brothers and sisters, friends. But they too would have had the same underlying question:

“How can I reflect Jesus’ kind of love to this person...” – and let me add these four words to this question – “...*in a new way.*” How can I reflect Jesus’ kind of love to this person *in a new way?*

The reason I’m adding those words is because that is what I hear Paul saying to the Colossian church. Wives and husbands, because you’re now following Jesus, love each other in a new way. Parents and children, because you’re now following Jesus, listen to each other in a new way. Servants and masters (or employers and employees), because you’re now following Jesus, work together in a new way.

Even if you approach this first line about submission with skepticism or the verses about servants and masters with red flags, we are still called as followers of Jesus to relate to one another *in a new way* than the culture around us has convinced us must be right and true.

N. T. Wright says: “If we don’t allow scripture to challenge us at places where our culture is doing its best to squeeze us into a different pattern, what use is it?”

So, what, if anything, can we learn from these few verses?

There are people that have literally gone through the Bible and chopped out (with actual scissors) all the parts of the Bible that seem to be permanently lost in the context of history to do any good to us today. These verses usually would be some of the first to go. But that would be such a shame! Because, I believe, if you do the hard work of wrestling with these verses, no matter

how they make you sweat, you’ll walk away learning a *new way* of loving others in your life.

*Work at these relationships as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord.*

*As for the Lord, who* – guess what? – modeled *submission* to us to the point of death on a cross, called us *children* in whom he takes great delight (and honored children rather than shooing them off), and *served* his disciples, washing their feet even as they called *him* Master. The direction that Paul takes is the direction of Jesus. If we cut out Scripture that talks about submission, then we have to cut out the story of Jesus!

If we choose to love our others as for the Lord, we will begin to love them in a new way, one that puts their needs above our own and seeks to know Christ’s love in the midst of that relationship. This may be some of the hardest work as followers of Jesus that Paul is calling us to in these few verses.

Some of you will process this with your Life Groups this week. One of the questions asks you to pick one of these relationships and consider not only how we might approach that person better, but *also* what the verse teaches us about how God relates to us. That’s always the starting point.

In every letter of Paul to every church, he offers practical wisdom for everyday living. He brings a reminder that with this new relationship to God through Jesus comes the responsibility to bring that into every part of our lives. Every moment of everyday life belongs to Jesus. *Whatever task you do*, says Paul, is lived as if for the Lord instead of humans. Believe it or not, this opened a whole new chapter for these new Christians.

In fact, with every one of these three pairings of relationships Paul is opening up new chapters socially for the Colossian church. Women, children, and slaves (or servants) had something in common. In that time in history, they were all considered to be possessions that belong to someone else rather than human beings with their own power and autonomy.

This may feel like an unfair power structure the way Paul lays it out. But his audience in Colossae would have been *more* surprised that he puts equal responsibility on the husbands, parents, and masters for respect and wisdom toward the other. In these few verses he is being as bold as he can possibly be within that culture. For example, we’d love for Paul to say that all slaves should be set free. That’s what feels right. But slaves or servants at that time were just a part of the

fabric of the economy. Slavery was not always associated with unkind or harsh treatment. Often, these people were just a part of the family and were trusted with the business side of the family with all of the wealth at their disposal to help the family. Many of these servants would not have left or changed the situation even if they were given the choice. That's not to say harsh treatment didn't exist, of course. Just one more reminder that the context was much different than we think.

Paul is feeling a need to create a bit of order in these new Christian communities, partly as a check on the new freedom he himself was preaching. To the Galatian church he writes:

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1*

Paul repeats himself over and over to say that if you're still trying to follow the old law you've missed the point. You're free now! But hold on, we still have responsibility in how we live out our faith in everyday tasks and relationships.

### **Story of the two drivers, as told by N. T. Wright**

Once upon a time, a country was ruled by a very strict president. He made rules and laws about everything. When you had to go to sleep, and when to get up. What to cook on each day and how much and at what time. There were regulations about who could own a car, when and where you could drive it. Every single aspect of life was governed by these rules.

One day, this president became ill and died. His successor, like everyone else in the country, was tired of all the rules. The pendulum swung the other way. Every rule was wiped away. People were now free to do anything they wanted at any time. Let the celebration begin! And people started dreaming of all the possibilities!

Soon after, two cars were coming directly at one another on a road that used to be one way. But there were no more rules. Both drivers were enjoying their newfound freedom. Both drivers either refused to yield or were not paying attention and smashed into each other. Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt. *But*, their angry and confused conversation became the defining moment in the new life of this country:

*Why were you driving on that side of the road?  
Why shouldn't I drive where I want?  
But you're supposed to drive on the right side?*

*Who says?*

*That's the law, that's the expectation. It's what we do!  
Not anymore, we don't. The president's dead! We're free now!*

By the time the police arrived, everyone had quickly come to the same conclusion. Even if you tear up the old laws, you still need a Highway Code. You still need ground rules for how and where you drive.

And this is the underlying point - if you have a highway code you are not *less* free to drive a car. You are *more* free. Now you have reasonable expectations of what others will do, and the high enough probability you'll be safe that you'll actually get into a car. [end of story]

How many parents in this room would want their 16-year-old driver out on roads with no rules?

I was talking with new drivers recently that were talking about all of the restrictions now placed on drivers during their first year. How late they can drive, who can be in the vehicle, and so on. It feels a bit oppressive in their eyes, *but* it's all for the purpose of making the roads safer for them and for everyone. It's all based on statistics and the desire to make a more *free* place for everyone to travel.

At this point, you're thinking, okay Brett, you're on page 5 and we're still talking about the backstory of *why* Paul is laying out these instructions for people. And you're right. Paul may have intentionally left these instructions painfully short so that we would have to flesh them out together in our families, life groups, and in our own context at this point in history. It's obvious that he wants us to continue asking the same question from above: "In my daily life, how can I love others in a new way that reflects Christ?"

I'm not going to try and fill in every detail. Paul didn't, and he leaves plenty of room for how this might look for each person and each relationship. But I do want to suggest a few things we learn from this overall picture that Paul gives us. I'll keep this brief as well.

### **1. Both sides of a relationship have a part to play.**

Each has to consider how they are going to act like Jesus toward the other *in a new way?*

If Paul would have merely said, "Wives be subject to your husbands," and left it at that, I too would have wanted to just chop that out. But he goes on to tell husbands to love their wives. He gives them the added responsibility of examining their treatment of them to

see if there is anything harsh. How have you spoken to her? How have you listened? How have you honored her when you speak about her to other people? Take a close look. The line between love and “being subject to” someone is actually a very, very small difference. To be subject is simply to *continue* to agree, as you did when you made that commitment on the wedding day, to be united to your partner, to be willing to make your decisions as a team.

Sometimes, you have to overcome huge differences in a life-long partnership. This is one that has threatened to make or break Wendy and I:

When Paul says, wives be subject to your husbands...husbands, love your wives, really, he’s just a single boy, standing in front of a married couple, asking them to love each other (let me know later if you get the reference).

## 2. All are encouraged to step up their game.

No one is off the hook. Everyone needs to take a look at how they are responding. Living in the First Century was to live in a place of constant power structures. People knew their place. Women were expected to serve every need of their men, and children had very little value until they reached a working age. Until then, they were expected in some cases to literally stand around and wait in case their parents had a need they could fill. It’s just a little different than our culture today.

But here’s what is not different. Everyone has work to do in the relationship. Children and young people, guess what? Parents do still get to set the ground rules for the way things happen in the home. There are expectations. And this rule of Paul’s to obey parents is the oldest, and even gets its own number in the Ten Commandments. Simply put: you love God when you honor your parents. But parents, guess what? Make sure that communicating those ground rules also communicates the “why” and that the final underlying word is “because I love you.” Do our children know this?

## 3. For all of them, the motivation is Christ’s example.

It’s all throughout the passage: “...as is fitting *in the Lord*...as your duty *in the Lord*...as if *for the Lord* and not humans.” The way this passage ends could be a reminder not just for masters (or supervisors, or employers), but for all: “Remember that you also have a

master in heaven.” If we truly understand the love God has for us, and recognize how sacrificial is God’s love for us, then our motivation is to do likewise, out of gratitude, and because we understand this is how we maintain a high quality of our relationships and therefore our own lives. Whoever you work for in this world is only secondary. You were work for the Lord, master or servant, so work hard and treat one another fairly and generously.

## 4. Lastly, all are encouraged to view the other as more human.

The mindset that Paul is trying to destroy is: *I have power and you do not*. In the midst of the new religious freedom that Jesus brings to this new church, Paul wants to help build a community of mutual love and sacrifice and fair treatment, and he wants it to be a response of what they have seen in Jesus.

In the whole book of Colossians, Paul is laying out lofty doctrines of God’s love, forgiveness in Christ, and the inherent dignity of humanity. But now he’s saying that all of these things God is communicating through his Word is intensely personal. It matters in the closest relationships we have. God cares about what happens daily in our homes.

Read the Book of Philemon if you get a chance. It’s a one chapter, one page letter from Paul to his friend about one of his former slaves, named Onesimus. The whole house has become Christians, Onesimus has left, and Paul is urging him to welcome him back home, not as a slave, but as a brother. His one message is simple:

*based on the work of love and forgiveness that had been started in your own heart by God, show the same to your escaped and now-believing slave Onesimus.*

God is writing each of us a letter, asking us to choose one of these places we find ourselves, and love like Jesus in a new way.

On the front cover is a quote by Elisabeth Elliot reminding us that our big God cares about our little lives. She writes:

*If you believe in a God who controls the big things, you have to believe in a God who controls the little things.*

Do you know her story? She and her husband, Jim, were called to serve as missionaries to a remote unreached people in Ecuador called the Aucas - a tribe in which no one had succeeded in meeting without being killed. After what seemed like a friendly first

meeting, Jim and four other missionaries were speared to death.

Now alone with a 10-month-old daughter, she continued serving in Ecuador, where she met two Auca women who taught her their language. Then, she went back as a missionary to this tribe of people that had killed her husband. They gave her the nickname, "Gikari," which means "woodpecker." She loved them with a love that can only come from being changed by the love of Christ first. How else can you explain this?

For three chapters Paul has been laying out a transformational message of what Christ can be in our lives. We've been walking through this together. Now, he's saying, it's time to let this impact your own closest relationships, the training ground for modeling this new, uncommon kind of love.

Amen.