

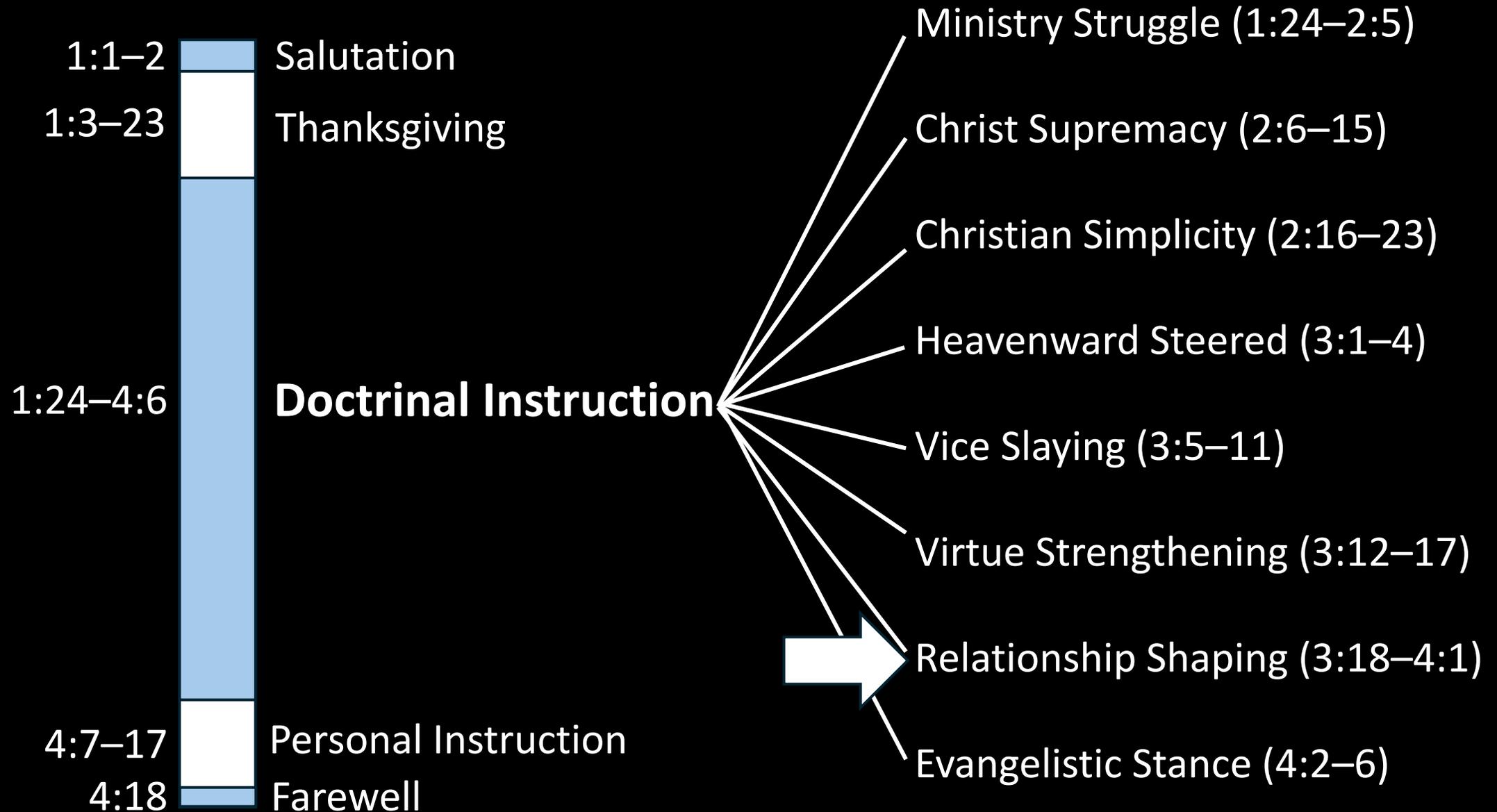
*Christ over
All: Paul's
Letter to the
Colossians*

“The Christ-
Centered
Home,”
Part 1

Colossians
3:18–4:1



THE OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS



COLOSSIANS 3:18–4:1

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”

Context & Overview

- The believer's *union with Christ* provides him with a new identity and a new relationship to this world (3:1–4).
- As he awaits the coming of Christ, the believer is to live out his real identity by *mortifying the sins* that mark his present life (3:5–11) and *cultivating Christ-like virtues* in their place (3:12–17).
- This process, known as *progressive sanctification*, has vast implications for relationships in one's spiritual family, *the church* (3:5–17).
- But it also has vast implications for relationships in one's physical family—the point to which Paul now turns.

“Seeing then that the state is made up of households, before speaking of the state we must speak of the management of the household. The parts of household management correspond to the persons who compose the household, and a complete household consists of slaves and freemen. Now we should begin by examining everything in its fewest possible elements; and the first and fewest possible parts of a family are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children. We have therefore to consider what each of these three relations is and ought to be.”

—Aristotle, *Politics*, Pt III





“Of household management we have seen that there are three parts—one is the rule of a master over slaves, which has been discussed already, another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature.”

—Aristotle, *Politics*, Pt XII

- Paul adapts the form of the “household code” common in Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures to describe the responsibilities of those *in Christ* as it relates to every-day life in the home.
- Paul acknowledges three pairs of relationships and describes the responsibilities of each:
 - 1) Wives and Husbands (3:18–19)
 - 2) Children and Fathers (3:20–21)
 - 3) Slaves and Masters (3:22–4:1)
- In each case, Paul first addresses those in submission, and then those in authority.
- Paul markedly deviates from the household codes common in his day by emphasizing *reciprocal nature* of these responsibilities and *the lordship of Jesus Christ* in each pair—and over each party.

COLOSSIANS 3:18–4:1

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. Slaves in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”

“If the Stoic disciple asked why he should behave in a particular way, his teacher would no doubt tell him that it was ‘fitting’ because it was in conformity *with nature*. When a Christian convert asked the same question, he was told that such behavior was ‘fitting in the Lord’; members of the believing community should live thus *for Christ’s sake*. The added words, simple as they are, transform the whole approach to ethics.”

—F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 162

Being *in Christ* changes everything.

I. Wives and Husbands in Christ (3:18–19)

A. The Duties of Wives (v. 18)

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

- **“Wives”** – Paul begins with the most foundational of family relationships (spouses), and with the party that is in the role of submission (wives).
- **“Be subject”** – continuous action; “be subjecting yourselves” – the reflexive voice of the verb implies a voluntary willingness (not merely compulsion) to place oneself under another’s authority.
 - The verb is common in the NT, being used to describe several authority/submission relationships:

- **Citizens → magistrates: Romans 13:1** – “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (see also Romans 13:5; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13).
- **Children → parents: Luke 2:51** – “And He [Jesus] went down with them [Joseph & Mary] and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all *these* things in her heart.”
- **Slaves → masters: Titus 2:9** – “*Urge* bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative” (see also 1 Peter 2:18).

- **Church members → elders: 1 Peter 5:5** – “You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.”
- **The church → Christ: Ephesians 5:24** – “But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything.”
- **Believers → believers: Ephesians 5:21** – “and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”
- **Believers → God: James 4:7** – “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (see also Hebrews 12:9).

- **Wives → husbands:**
 - **Ephesians 5:22–23** – “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.”
 - **Titus 2:5** – Older women are to train the younger women “to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.”
 - **1 Peter 3:1–2** – “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any *of them* are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.”

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

- **“To your husbands”** – Paul limits the scope of this command to the wife’s *own husband*, and not to all men equally.
- **“As is fitting”** – Paul introduces the justification for the command: it is *appropriate*; it is not *inhumane, harmful, or demeaning*, but consistent with God’s natural design; it is essential for human flourishing.
- **“In the Lord”** – the *spiritual sphere* in which this submission is to be practiced: in the sphere of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, the One who is sovereign over all; the fulfillment of this duty uniquely confesses the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

What Is NOT Entailed in a Wife's Submission

- Acceptance of an inferior essence or value (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Pet 3:7 – “a fellow heir of the grace of life”; Gal 3:28).
- Agreement with a husband's claim to absolute authority (Col 2:10 – Christ “is the head over all rule and authority”).
- Consent to participate in sin, whether with the husband or at his command (Acts 5:29 – “We must obey God rather than men”).
- Rejection of other divinely-established authorities: the state (Rom 13:1), one's parents (Eph 6:1–3), the elders of the church (Heb 13:17), etc.
- Abandonment of all personal opinions, preferences, and interests (1 Pet 3:7 – “You husbands . . . live with your wives in an understanding way”).

What Is NOT Entailed in a Wife's Submission (cont'd)

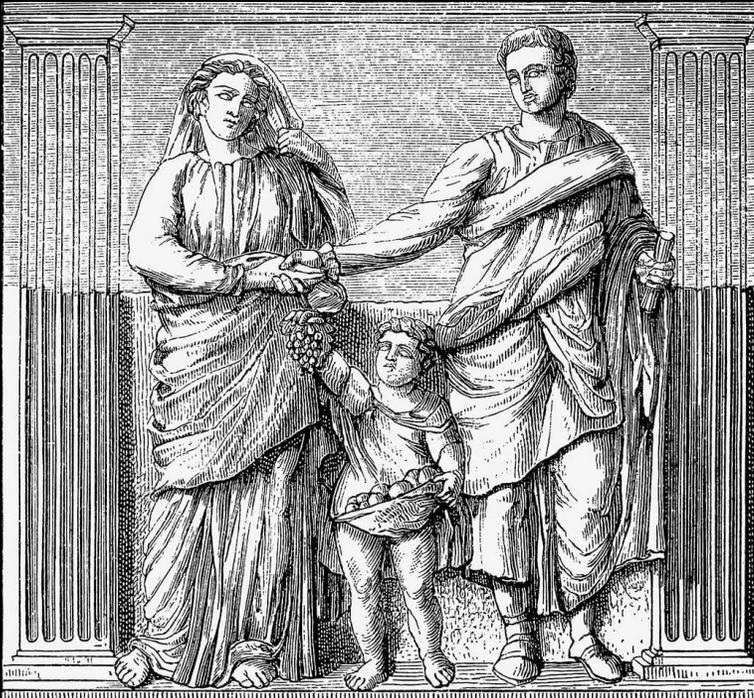
- Agreement to receive spiritual instruction only from the husband (Titus 2:3–5 – older women are to disciple younger women).
- Inability to contribute unique skills for the flourishing of one's marriage and household (Prov 31:10–31).
- Suppression of spiritual giftedness for the good of the church (1 Pet 4:10 – “As each one has received a special gift, employ it . . .”).
- Refusal to point out a husband's sin, to evangelize him, or to encourage him in sanctification when he doesn't invite it (but remember 1 Pet 3:1–6).
- Silent acceptance of a life of fear, danger, abuse, or neglect.

But a wife's submission does entail a myriad of daily, practical things that require humility, selflessness, and faith that God knows what is best for her.

I. Wives and Husbands in Christ (3:18–19) – cont’d

B. The Duties of Husbands (v. 19)

“Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.”



- “Husbands” – Paul now turns to the other half of the pair; this reciprocity was *not* part of non-Christian household codes.
- In ancient Roman society, the husband was the *paterfamilias*—the head over all his household.
- He exercised *pater potestas*—absolute, unquestioned authority over his home.

“Husbands, **love your wives** and do not be embittered against them.”

- “**Love**” – continuous action; “maintain the habit of loving,” “make it your practice to love”; while the wife’s requirement to submit was part of Greek and Jewish teaching, the husband’s requirement to love was not.
 - The verb in Christian usage has a distinct nuance, describing “sacrificial, self-giving love whose model is Christ himself” (Moo, *Colossians*, 303).
 - The Colossians believers were previously called “beloved” (3:12), and they were instructed to put on “love” (3:14).
 - Now, husbands in particular are called to demonstrate this “love” in real action toward their own “**wives.**”

“This is not simply a matter of affectionate feeling or [physical] attraction; it involves his active and unceasing care for her well-being.”

—F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 164

“Genuine love is not merely a feeling or an involuntary attraction. It involves a willful choice, and that is why the word is often in the form of an imperative. Far from being something we ‘fall into’ by happenstance, authentic love involves a deliberate, voluntary commitment to sacrifice whatever we can for the good of the person we love.”

—John MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family*, 58–59

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.” —**Ephesians 5:25–33**

“What higher motive could there be for the husband to love his wife? By loving her as Christ loved the church, he honors Christ in the most direct and graphic way. He becomes the embodiment of Christ’s love to his own wife, a living example to the rest of his family, a channel of blessing to his entire household, and a powerful testimony to a watching world.”

—John MacArthur, *The Fulfilled Family*, 78

“The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to top him, nor out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved by him.”

—Matthew Henry

“Husbands, love your wives and **do not be embittered against them.**”

- “Do not be embittered against them” – the prohibition; Paul partly explains the positive command *to love* by forbidding its antithesis.
 - The verb describes a state of allowing *bitter feelings* to become established in response to a wife’s unpleasing actions—feelings that would then lead to harsh treatment.
 - NRSV: “never treat them harshly”; TNIV: “do not be harsh with them.”



What Is NOT Entailed in a Husband's Love

- Sacrifice of the responsibilities as the leader of the home for the sake of peace (1 Cor 11:3 – “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman . . .”).
- Agreement with a wife's demand to be the husband's highest love (Luke 14:26 – “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple”).
- Consent to participate in sin, whether with the wife, or at her demand (Acts 5:29 – “We must obey God rather than men”).
- Abandonment of all personal opinions, preferences, and interests.

What Is NOT Entailed in a Husband's Love (cont'd)

- A blank check—literally or figuratively—to do everything she asks.
- Refusal to point out a wife's sin, to evangelize her, or to encourage her in sanctification when she doesn't invite it.
- Making decisions for the home based on fear of her response, thus failing to do the *right* thing.
- Willingness to allow her to do physical or spiritual harm to herself or the children, simply to keep her happy.

But a husband's love does entail a myriad of daily, practical things that require humility, selflessness, and faith that God knows what is best for him.