

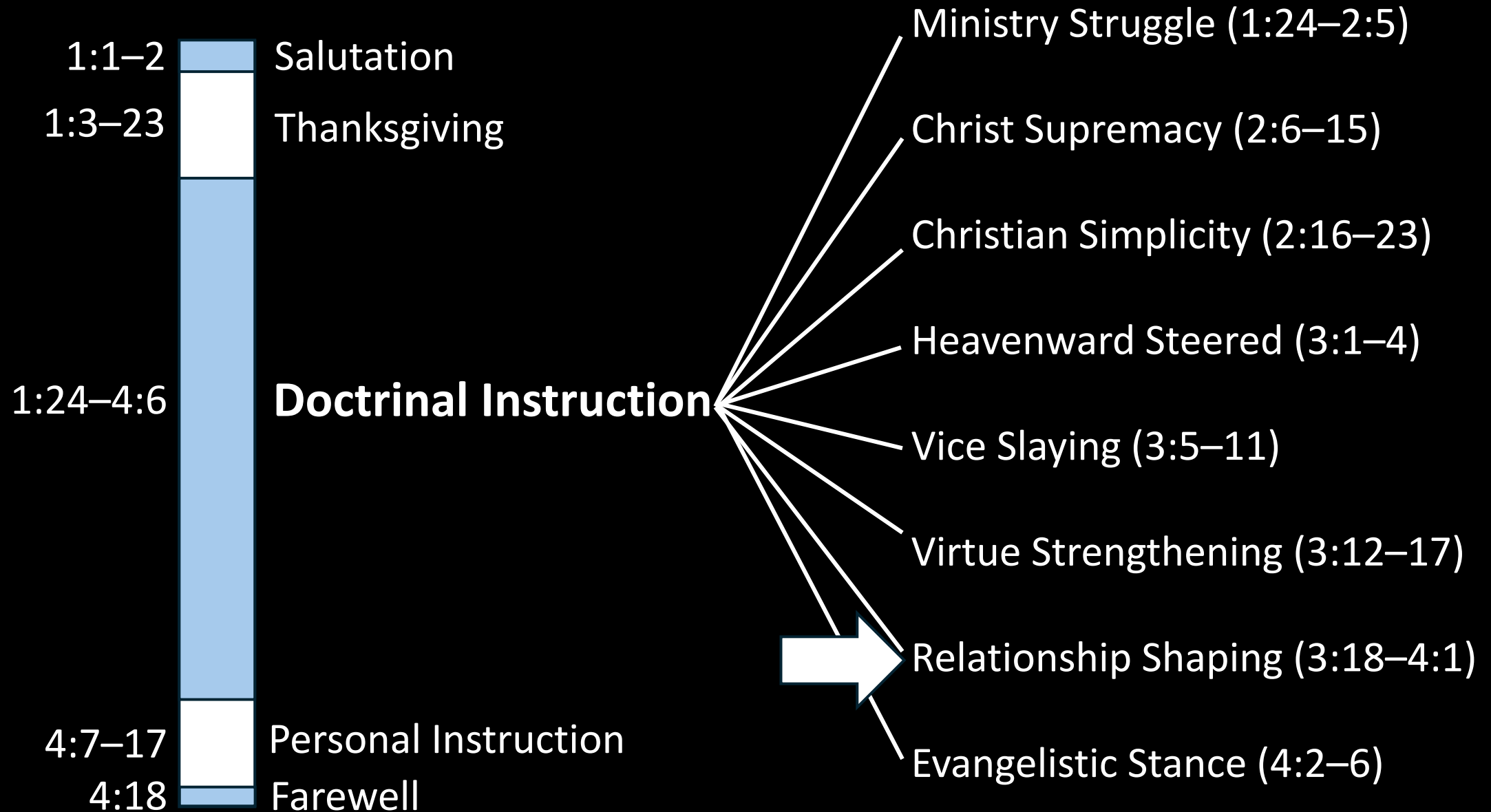
*Christ over
All: Paul's
Letter to the
Colossians*

“The Christ-
Centered
Home,”
Part 3

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.”

- Paul focuses on *three pairs of relationships* that comprised the Greco-Roman household, describing the responsibilities of each party:
 - 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 instructs those in positions of *subordination*, and then those in positions of *authority*.
- The Christian’s lofty status that Paul previously described as “union with Christ” could be wrongly applied, resulting in the disregard for authority or the misuse of authority.
- Paul adapts the structure of the *household codes* of his day but differs by emphasizing: (a) *the reciprocal nature* of these responsibilities, and (b) *the lordship of Jesus Christ* as the controlling factor.

“The household codes [of Paul] did not set out to abolish or reshape existing social structures, but to Christianize them. As far as slavery was concerned, it took a long time for the essential incompatibility of the institution with the ethic of the gospel, or indeed with the biblical doctrine of creation, to be properly assimilated by the general Christian consciousness.”

—F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, 171



Although Paul here applies truth directly to a relationship that does not exist in our context, his instruction provides transcendent principles for understanding how Christian should behave in the sphere of labor today.



III. Slaves and Masters (3:22–4:1)

A. The Duty of Slaves (3:22–25)

1. THE DUTY ANNOUNCED (v. 22a)

“Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth.”

- **“Slaves”** – The address indicates slaves were a part of “the saints and faithful brethren . . . at Colossae” (1:2; also 3:11). We know that *Onesimus* was one of them (4:9; see the letter to Philemon).
- **“In all things obey”** – a command to *continuous* and *comprehensive* submission (the same language was applied to children in v. 20); this was wholly antithetical to the general mindset of slaves in that day.

2. THE DUTY APPLIED (vv. 22b–24a)

“not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” (v. 22b).

- “Not with external service” – literally, “eye-slavery” — “service that is performed only to make an impression in the owner’s presence”; such individuals *work* only when they are *watched*.
- “Who please men” – explains the “eye-slavery”; they are those who work to *flatter* or *gain favor*, but not because it is *right*.
- “Sincerity of heart” – the opposite of *duplicity* and *inconsistency*.
- “Fearing the Lord” – the ultimate motivation is an attitude of adoration and submission to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Master.

“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” (vv. 23–24a).

- **“Whatever you do”** – Paul does not limit the scope of his instruction.
- **“Heartily”** – literally, “from the soul”; it is the opposite of the “eye-slavery” forbidden in v. 22; it is work done “with all the individual’s life force behind it.” There is no compelling need for supervision.
- **“As for the Lord rather than for men”** – the ultimate motivation for all labor, and even for all of life (1 Cor 10:31).
- Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813–1843): “Do everything in earnest, if it is worth doing, then do it with all your might.”

“The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in church and by works done therein. . . . The whole world could abound with services to the Lord . . . not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field.”

—Martin Luther



“What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God. . . . We should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and the work flow.”

—Martin Luther



“The shop, the barn, the scullery, and the smithy become temples when men and women do all to the glory of God!”

—Charles Spurgeon



“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**’ (vv. 23–24a).

- “**Knowing that**” – Paul points slaves to a *logical reason* for such a counter-cultural approach to labor.
- “**The reward of the inheritance**” – not a reference to salvation itself, although that is a guaranteed gift; rather, a reference to the reward (“remuneration”) given at the judgment seat of Christ in response to faithfulness to Christ’s commands (2 Cor 5:9–10).
- Considering that most slaves in the Roman empire would not qualify for any inheritance, this promise by Paul was powerful.

3. THE DUTY ASSERTED (vv. 24b–25)

“It is **the Lord Christ** whom you serve” (v. 24b).

- “The Lord Christ” – a unique title (found elsewhere only in Romans 16:18) and used for *special emphasis*.

κύριος

kyrios / Lord

- Throughout this section (3:18–4:1), Paul emphasizes that **the lordship of Jesus Christ** is the fundamental explanation for every duty of submission.

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.**”

“It is the Lord Christ whom **you serve**” (v. 24b).

- “**You serve**” – either a statement of fact (“you do serve the Lord Christ”), or a command (“Serve the Lord Christ!” —LSB); probably the latter; labor—regardless of the context—is never “secular.”
- “This command is in some ways the center of 3:18–4:1, enunciating the fundamental reality underlining the entire household code and bringing together the titles ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ as a way of tying this section firmly to the overall Christocentric message of Colossians” (Douglas Moo, *Colossians*, 313).

“For **he who does wrong** **will receive the consequences** of the wrong which he has done, and that **without partiality**” (v. 25).

- “**He who does wrong**” – literally, “the one who is unjust”—i.e., the one who does not serve the Lord and works poorly for his master.
 - **Philemon 18** – “But if he has wronged [same verb as here] you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”
- “**Will receive the consequences**” – as surely as there is a reward for faithfulness, there is discipline for unfaithfulness.
- “**Without partiality**” – God is not a God of favoritism (Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9); discipline is always meted out justly.

B. The Duty of Masters (4:1)

“Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”

- **“Masters”** – Philemon was directly addressed as part of this category; in some sense, Paul’s letter to Philemon serves as an addendum to this exhortation.
- **“Grant”** – “to cause to be brought about, make happen”; the language of the verb emphasizes self-involvement.
- **“Justice and fairness”** – the first term emphasizes *conformity to God’s righteousness*, and thus what is “right, fair, equitable”; the second term is synonymous and thus adds emphasis: *scrupulous* fairness.

**“Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness,
knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”**

- **“Knowing that”** – Paul now points masters to a *logical reason* for such a counter-cultural approach to the use of their authority (see v. 24).
- **“A Master in heaven”** – the language of this phrase connects two truths—one in the immediate context, and one in the distant context:
 - (a) Slaves were to do all things for “the Lord Christ” (3:22–24); thus, Christian slaves and masters have the *same Kurios* (“Master/Lord”).
 - (b) The current focus of all Christians is to be on “heaven”—“the things above” (3:1–2), where Christ is currently seated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LABORERS

- ✓ **Union with Christ must manifest itself in a deep and sincere respect for authority, including in the sphere of labor. Without explicit biblical justification, any rebellion is sin, for above the master is the Lord Christ.**
- ✓ **Any labor—public or private—that is not inherently contrary to God’s law is to be done for His glory. If it is contrary to God’s law, it should not be done at all.**
- ✓ **The quality of one’s labor is defined most by the earnestness with which it is done—by the absence of deceitfulness and laziness. Your real work is what you do when no one is watching.**
- ✓ **The benefit of labor should never be equated with daily compensation; it must also consider the future, divine reward.**

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

- ✓ **Union with Christ must manifest itself in managerial practices that are objectively fair and equitable. Partiality, unequal scales, disregard for laws, and taking advantage of those under you are antithetical to the ethics of Christ.**
- ✓ **Although you exercise authority over others, remember that you are under the authority of the ultimate Master, to whom you will one day given an account.**
- ✓ **The exercise of oversight must always remember that this present world is not the ultimate one. “Keep seeking things above, where Christ is.”**