



Colossians 3:18 – 4:6

Have you ever noticed if you travel to another town or city that the drinking water can taste a bit “funny”? (Did anyone say Adelaide? 😊) Melbourne water, of course, has no particular taste to it, isn’t that right?



Colossae existed beside a bubbling stream of fresh, pure mountain water – the very one in this photograph. I’ve tasted that water! But, when I read the so-called “Rules for Christian households”¹ in Colossians 3:18 – 4:2, “wives submit”, “children obey”, “slaves obey” – I get a “funny”, unpleasant taste in my modern mouth. Was not this the same Apostle who declared that in Christ “there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28)? Had Paul’s radically egalitarian Gospel calling people to freedom and from old inequitable structures of society changed? These instructions taste a bit off today!



- Should we join those who say the Apostle was really a **misogynist** and supporter of slavery? **No!** Paul supported **women as co-workers** in the Gospel. He helped Onesimus the slave to become a Christian. Unlike any of his Roman contemporaries, he **addressed** women, children, and slaves **directly**², treating them as independent, personal, moral agents.
- Should we adopt the view that God prefers **males** to be **in charge**? **No!** Roman patriarchy is not **God’s blueprint** for gender roles! Paul makes **no reference** to either a “natural” hierarchy or a creation order in the text. Instead, he appeals to the *new* nature in Christ.
- Should we join with **conservatives** who say, “If only we would return to the **traditional Christian family model.**” But which tradition is Christian? From which era, which continent, and which expression of church in history shall I

¹ A title not present in the Greek text, but added by today’s publishers of the Bible

² No extant household instructions like his exist. Paul’s equal respect for them was anathema in Roman times

find *the* Christian model? As I shall show, in Colossians chapter 3 Paul is helping Christians long ago to navigate **inequitable** legal obligations set by Roman law, **not prescribing** a model household.

- **Should we take view that** Paul wanted to protect the reputation of the Gospel by restraining Christian freedom? **No!** Christianity was **already on the nose** across the empire. That horse bolted long ago.³ Besides, Paul appeals to Christians to serve others humbly and respectfully as the way of life for all situations as it is the way Christ has modelled life for us.⁴

No, we don't need to adopt these flawed, but common apologies for Paul's funny tasting instructions to "submit" and "obey".

Instead, it's my strong opinion⁵, that Paul's **instructions** to wives and husband, children and parents, and slaves and masters in Colossians 3 **do not speak directly to our households** today. Instead, they **address a particular people** and place in history. Now, before you charge me as having no regard for the authority of Scripture and walk away, I **did not say** the passage is useless to us. Instead, I'll give a brief study of the **original setting** of those households to help us find encouragement for our faith from this passage today.

*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 only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. ⁴¹ **Masters**, treat your **slaves** justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.*

Colossians 3:18-4:1

³ The historian Tacitus accused Christians of a "hatred of the human race" because they did not comply with the obligations expected by Rome.

⁴ Col. 3:17

⁵ And that of many reputable scholars, including David E. Garland, Ben Witherington III, I. Howard Marshall

1. The Original Setting at Colossae



The typical household in Colossae of the 1st Century is well known. For time's sake, I'll only look in detail at the circumstances of the **third** couplet Paul addresses – **slaves** and **masters** (Col. 3:22-4:1).⁶

Firstly, there is **no parallel** here in Melbourne 2022 to the “slaves” and “masters” of Colossae circa 1st Century.

Some suggest that employers and employees are the target of Paul's words today. This is **preposterous!** Rome was built on the back of up to **ten million slaves** by the time Paul was writing.⁷ Their daily existence was often bleak and hard. Aligned with the views of Socrates, The Roman world viewed them as **machines, livestock** or owned assets. They had **no legal status**. Their masters⁸ had the legal right to **expect unquestioning obedience**. Aristotle had recommended **harsh punishment** for productivity, and ancient Rome made it into an art form.



Thus, we could say that Paul had **no choice** but to appeal to Christian slaves to keep obeying. If he had encouraged them to exercise their new freedoms in Christ in society – to disobey their masters, or **run away**, severe punishment or even death may have ensued.

REFLECT: Have **you** been the victim of power imbalance in the workplace? I sympathise with you. But, as bad as your circumstances may have been, workplaces in Melbourne 2022 compare in no way to those of Roman slaves.

Paul was, as we can see by the particularly oppressive circumstances back then, **incomparable to our own, not writing directly to you**. He was **not** calling you to obey oppressive bosses in an unquestioning manner today!

Instead, it was to those 1st Century Christian slaves, and others like them, that the call to obey was directed.

⁶ Wives and husbands, children and fathers

⁷ According to the British Museum, based on an estimated population of 50 million people by the 1st C AD

⁸ Usually the head of the household

What **we** can glean for ourselves is that Paul appealed to ancient Christian slaves to **serve in their situation**, as Paul instructed all Christians to do, to humbly serve as if **servicing Christ Himself**. To find satisfaction in the rewards promised by the Gospel not those promised by the world.⁹ We can see what Paul meant by serving as if “serving **Christ Himself**” in chapter 4, verses 2-6, where he writes to all the Colossian Christians:

Roman slaves & masters

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. ⁴¹ Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

(Colossians 3:22–4:1)

² Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, ⁴ so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should. ⁵ Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

We must try to appreciate **how hard** it must have been for slaves to follow Paul’s advice. What an **incredible burden** he laid upon them. We should **never imagine God wanted humble, unquestioning obedience to overlords to be the norm** for any human being.

Paul, however, added some comfort to his instruction to slaves. Firstly, gave **reciprocal obligations to masters who were Christians**.¹⁰ He appealed to masters to act in **fairness and justice** with their slaves – a notion considered **as nonsense** in Roman society.¹¹ Another comfort lay in the fact that Paul was writing to them while himself a prisoner.¹² Thus, he was not asking slaves to do any more than he himself was doing. Lastly, Paul was sending co-workers to encourage them, including Onesimus, a slave become Christian and possibly returning to his Christian household.¹³

Roman slaves & masters

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(Colossians 3:22–4:1)

We may wish Paul had acted to **overturn Roman slavery**, but he held no office among Roman officials that would make this remotely possible, he had been a

⁹ An implication of his guiding principle in Col. 3:1

¹⁰ Note that slaves were not to take advantage of masters (as Onesimus had done, see *Philemon*)

¹¹ Aristotle had taught that to talk of justice with regard to something one owns is nonsense.

¹² Col. 4:18

¹³ Col. 4:9, see *The Letter to Philemon*

mere wandering missionary, and was now in chains. Abolition was still 300 years away in the empire. But his Gospel planted some of the seeds from which eventual abolition of slavery did grow.

Let me turn briefly to consider Colossian **wives** and **children**.¹⁴ They were beset with similar circumstances to slaves. They had **no legal status**,¹⁵ no formal education. They were utilities for a man's prosperity, and for empire's order and glory.

REFLECT: Have **you** suffered from an imbalance of power in relationships today? I sympathise with you. Sadly, I've sat through many modern **weddings** gritting my teeth as a wife is told by the preacher, justified by a few verses of Scripture spoken out of context, to submit to her new husband. Sadly, it has taken recent Royal Commissions to curtail these actions by Christian leaders.

Please appreciate that wives and children in Roman times lived in incomparably **worse circumstances** to most do today. They were **bound by law** to submit and obey.

Paul's appeal to keep submitting **was not written to modern wives and children**, as if **you** should willingly obey a man or as if God prefers it that way. Rather, as with slaves, we can imagine that Paul couldn't call them to exercise their new-found Christian freedom overtly for fear that they would face more **danger** or even **death**.¹⁶

As with slaves¹⁷, Paul urged them to **humbly serve** in the way that **he would instruct any Christian in any circumstance** – to humbly serve others, as if serving **Christ Himself**. The curious phrase “as is fitting in the Lord” is probably short-hand for what is spelled out in Colossians 3:1-17 and 4:2-6.

Roman couples & families

¹⁸Wives, [willingly submit] to your husbands, **as is fitting in the Lord**. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your **acceptable duty in the Lord**. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

(Colossians 3:18 – 21)

¹⁴ Of any age if unmarried were bound to work for the head of the household unquestioningly

¹⁵ “...in the strict legal sense we call a familia a number of people who are by birth or by law subjected to the potestas (power) of one man” – Upan's *Digest*

¹⁶ though the Greek for “submit” instructs wives to do so of their own will, unheard of in Roman culture

¹⁷ And as he applied to himself as a prisoner of the Roman empire

We should try to appreciate what an **incredible burden** Paul's call to submit and obey must have laid upon wives and children. We should **never imagine God wanted** such an imbalance of power **to be the norm** for any wife or child.

Paul did add comfort to his appeal to wives and children, as he did to slaves. It came in the form of **reciprocal expectations** upon Christian **husbands and fathers – to be loving and not harsh** towards wives and children. To our modern ears this sounds remedial, but no such expectations lay upon the heads of households throughout the empire.

Roman couples & families

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(Colossians 3:18 – 21)

The church at Colossae, as in all early church examples, did not exist independently at this point in history. Instead, it existed as the sum of Christian households, along with various outcasts and travellers. Insofar as the households and individuals lived humbly as servants of Christ, so the “church” would be healthy. Paul's instructions to households are thoroughly in step with his appeals to the “church” in chapter 3.

2. Gospel Priorities for Today

Paul's call in Colossians 3:17 concurs with Paul's universal appeal to Christians wherever and whenever they may be: “...**whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

- i. **In the light of our learning today, firstly, I recommend that we ensure that the church should treat every person with high value and equal dignity.** Relationships today are far more diverse and complex than at Colossae long ago. Yet, we preach the same Gospel that lifts up the **lowly and brings down the dominators.** If we have anything to say to households, it should be an appeal for equality, dignity, and justice in relationships.
- ii. Secondly, **humble Christian servants** are still the building blocks for **healthy churches** today. As Paul showed, people of any age, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, or status, can serve Christ and expect the Gospel's full rewards. It may be tough for many of them to do so in many circumstances. But it's humble grace-filled relationships that Paul calls for in every age - serving Christ, not in self-assertion, but in **self-giving.**

iii. Lastly, **let's not use Scripture as dogma** to dominate people or interfere in their lives.

Nick Cave, the enigmatic songwriter and performer said recently, "The biggest problem I find with religion is the certainty of belief... moral superiority, or dogmatism."

Many people in our city have turned away from the Church's constant bossing voice of who's in and who's out, what is godly and what is a sin. How sad that many Christian leaders just last week have been present in the media defending their "right" to pontificate and to marginalize! Oh that they might be seen siding with the needy, with those lacking fair and just treatment in our churches and society today.

Conclusion

Sometimes, visitors to *our city* tell me that our water tastes "funny". This sermon might "taste" a bit off to some listeners today too. It may sound challenging compared to what some have been taught in the past. It may unsettle the current power base or prick the conscience of others who currently like to dominate and press others down. It may call into question the self-superiority of some. I too must be careful to listen carefully to Paul's Gospel for my own leadership.



But to me, today, the Gospel Paul proclaimed and lived tastes most sweet and pure because through it freedom and grace abound.

