

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Worshipping Christ in the Family and in the Workplace

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians, Colossians 3:18–4:1. We are nearing the end of our verse-by-verse study of this book in our series "Preeminence." And today we come to the most practical section of this book that teaches us how to worship Christ in our families and in our workplaces.

And why is that important? Why is this section of Scripture—Colossians 3:18–4:1—important?

Several years ago, James Dobson wrote about a troubled young man who grew up in a dysfunctional household. That's an understatement. Here's what Dobson writes:

"He began his life with all the classic handicaps and disadvantages. His mother was a powerfully built, dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. She had been married three times, and her second husband divorced her because she beat him up regularly. The father of the child ... was her third husband; he died of a heart attack a few months before the child's birth. As a consequence the mother had to work long hours from his earliest childhood.

She gave him no affection, no love, no discipline, and no training during those early years. She even forbade him to call her at work. Other children had little to do with him, so he was alone most of the time. He was absolutely rejected from his earliest childhood. When he was thirteen years old a school psychologist commented that he probably didn't even know the meaning of the word *love*. During adolescence, the girls would have nothing to do with him and he fought with the boys.

Despite a high IQ, he failed academically, and finally dropped out during his third year of high school. He thought he might find acceptance in the Marine Corps; they reportedly built men, and he wanted to be one. But his problems went with him. The other Marines laughed at him and ridiculed him. He fought back, resisted authority, and was court-martialed and thrown out of the Marines with an undesirable discharge. So there he was—a young man in his early twenties, absolutely friendless. He was small and scrawny in stature. He had an adolescent squeak in his voice. He was balding. He had no talent, no skill, no sense of worthiness. Once again he thought he could run from his problems, so he went to live in a foreign country. But he was rejected there also. While there he married a girl who had been an illegitimate child and brought her back to America with him. Soon she began to develop the same contempt for him that everyone else displayed. She bore him two children, but he never enjoyed the status and respect a father should have. His marriage continued to crumble. His wife demanded more and more things that he could not provide. Instead of being his ally against the bitter world, as he hoped, she became his most vicious opponent. She could outfight him, and she learned to bully him. On one occasion she locked him in the bathroom as punishment. Finally she forced him to leave.

He tried to make it on his own, but he was terribly lonely. After days of solitude, he went home and literally begged her to take him back. He surrendered all pride. Despite his meager salary, he brought her \$78 as a gift, asking her to take it and spend it any way she wished. But she belittled his feeble attempts to supply the family's needs. She ridiculed his failure. At one point he fell on his knees and wept bitterly as the darkness of his private nightmare enveloped him.

Finally, in silence he pleaded no more. No one wanted him. No one had ever wanted him. The next day he was a strangely different man. He arose, went to the garage, and took down a rifle he had hidden there. He carried it with him to his newly acquired job at a book storage building. And from a window on the third floor of that building, shortly after noon, November 22, 1963, he sent two shells crashing into the head of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Lee Harvey Oswald, the rejected, unlovable failure, killed the man who, more than any other man on earth, embodied all the success, beauty, wealth, and family affection which he lacked.^[1] In firing that rifle, he utilized the *one* skill he had learned in his entire, miserable lifetime.”²

That tragedy took place more than sixty years ago.³ But the pattern of a lost and transgressive young person has been painfully repeated in American society again and again and again. And that’s why God’s word is not silent on the importance and the goodness of a well-ordered family—a family that puts God first and honors the Lord in all that they do.⁴

Let’s look at that this morning. We’re going to start by looking at the Christian family, and then we can transition to work in the Christian life.⁵

What should a Christian family look like?⁶ Write this down as #1 in your notes.⁷

1) Christian families should be **ordered** properly (3:18–21)⁸

And that includes husbands, wives, children, and parents. Paul curiously starts with wives in **verse 18**. I don’t know why he does that. This must have been something very important for him to convey to the church in Colossae.

He writes in **verse 18**,

¹⁸ Wives, submit⁹ to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.¹⁰

1 Anyone who knows anything about the Kennedy household and legacy knows how much of a façade this was.

2 James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1974), 9, 11. Quoted in Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 121–2.

3 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 122: “[Lee Harvey Oswald’s] miserable life experience is paralleled today by thousands upon thousands who have known the same or even greater lack of affection, discipline, and training because much of the American family experience is a relational desert.”

4 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 164–5: “The teaching that Christians are to have relationships that affect society is not unique to Colossians. Jesus says in Matthew 5:13–14, ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.’ Paul urged the Philippians, saying, ‘Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world’ (Phil. 2:15). Peter counseled his readers: ‘Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation’ (1 Pet. 2:12; cf. Matt. 25:31–46; James 2:15–16). Christianity therefore is not the religion of monks and hermits. Believers are not called to withdraw from society, but to influence it for Christ—particularly through their relationships.”

5 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 116: “The domestic rules given here in Colossians were vastly different from those of the day. Wives here were addressed *equally* with their husbands, something radically new. Also, both husbands and wives had duties—not just the wives. They were both admonished ‘in the Lord.’ The context of this phrase begins in verse 17, which makes it clear that the totality of their lives was to be regulated by it. This brought a vast dignity to both men and women. They were both under the Lordship of Christ as equals. All of this was immensely elevating to women and would raise their positions greatly in the ancient and modern world.”

6 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 296: “The new family of God gave believers their fundamental identity, but the spiritual family did not eliminate the continuing significance of the physical family and the relations appropriate to its smooth functioning. Colossians 3:18–4:1, like the other household codes, is best seen as giving guidance for the way Christians are to bring all of life under the Lordship of Christ.”

7 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 175: “If all Christians displayed the characteristics of relationships as embodied in the principles of this text, the results would be dramatic. Believers would indeed become lights shining in the darkness.”

8 JEAN DAILLÉ: “God is not a God of confusion or of disorder but of peace. From this it follows that to resist subjection when persons are called to it is a thwarting of God’s will and a subversion of his order. It is also not a mark of fortitude and courage but of folly and malignity to oppose it.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 231.

9 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 169: “God designed that a wife’s submission operate within a context of love. In that way she is protected because a man who truly loves his wife would never force her to submit to something humiliating, degrading, or that violates her conscience. The godly husband loves his wife like Christ loves the church.”

10 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 117: “Christ’s word to the woman in the Christian home is: ‘Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.’ I know of few statements that will rouse the ire of our modern assertive, rights-seeking, power-seeking culture than this. But it is God’s Word, and we must resist those who would explain it away. It is God’s design for fullness.”

Notice, if you will, the number of times that “the Lord” (Greek: κύριος [*kyrios*]) is invoked in this passage. This is not an isolated occurrence in **verse 18**.¹¹

In **verse 20**, Paul says, “this pleases the Lord.” In **verse 22**, Paul says, “fearing the Lord.” In **verse 23**, “work heartily, as for the Lord.” In **verse 24**, “knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance.” Also in **verse 24**, “You are serving the Lord Christ.” And in **chapter 4, verse 1**, Paul says, “you also have a Master [Capital M—Master] in heaven.” It’s actually the same Greek word as the previous (κύριος), even though the ESV understandably translates it differently in English. That’s seven references to “the Lord” in this passage. That is what we call emphasis, folks!

And Paul connects all these roles and responsibilities (wives, husbands, children, parents, servants, masters) to our identity in Christ and our submission ultimately to him. That’s why the title of this message is “Worshipping Christ in the Family and in the Workplace.” This passage is an outworking of **chapter 3, verse 17**, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

And as part of that expectation, Paul tells wives in the church family to submit to their husbands. Let’s talk about that. Let’s talk about this term and this mindset that Paul calls “fitting in the Lord.” What is biblical submission?

Notice in the text that women are not called to submit to every man under the sun. And notice too that men don’t have moral authority over all women. No, this is each, particular wife submitting to her own husband in the church.

And a wife is not called to be *subservient* to her husband. Neither is she called *inferior* to her husband. It would be wrong for us to infer that from this verse. If submission meant inferiority, then our whole doctrine of the Trinity would fall apart because Christ submits to God the Father.¹² How could that imply inferiority?

And yet, let’s move beyond the caveats, submission does mean something. What does it mean? Here’s the Greek word used in **Colossians 3: ὑποτάσσω**.¹³ It means “to submit” or “to be subject to.”¹⁴ This word has the idea of voluntarily putting yourself under the authority of another.¹⁵ The Greek ὑπο means “under.” And the Greek τάσσω means “to place.”¹⁶ So wives are commanded here to place themselves under the authority of their husbands.¹⁷

11 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 166: “Christianity did, however, introduce several new elements to the home. First, Christianity introduced a new presence into the home, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 3:18, 20, 23, 24; 4:1). That new presence brings a new power. Christ is there, and His Spirit provides the power to make the family what it ought to be. Second, there is a new purpose: ‘Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (3:17). Finally, Christianity introduced a new pattern for the home: ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church’ (Eph. 5:25). The new pattern is Christ. He is the model for us to follow.”

12 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 116–7: “There is a hierarchy in the Holy Trinity, and yet equality. Orthodoxy teaches that the Son is simultaneously *equal* to the Father and *submissive* to him. Likewise, *equality* and *submissiveness* can coexist in human relationships, including the marriage relationship.”

13 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 262: “‘Submit’ (ὑποτάσσεσθε) is a middle present imperative, signifying that the wives should voluntarily subject themselves to their husbands.”

14 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 247: “‘subjection’ means ‘subordination,’ not ‘subjugation.’”

15 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 299–300: “But particularly characteristic of New Testament usage are exhortations to voluntarily ‘put oneself under’ the authority or direction of someone or something else: all believers to God (Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7) or to his law (Rom. 8:7); the church to Christ (Eph. 5:24); Jews to God’s righteousness (Rom 10:3); humans to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13); Christians to their leaders (1 Cor. 16:16); slaves to masters (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18); young men to older men (1 Pet. 5:5); children to their parents (Luke 2:51); wives to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5).”

16 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 299: “The verb being translated is *hypotassō*, which etymologically could be rendered “order” (*tassō*) “under” (*hypo*). The verb is not common in pre-New Testament Greek but does occur thirty times in the LXX, where it occasionally refers to humans “submitting” to God (2 Macc. 9:12) but more often refers to submission in the secular sphere, particularly to the military and the state.”

17 Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 262n11: “Wayne Grudem (*Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism* [Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006], 117) argues that ‘no one has yet produced any examples in ancient Greek literature ... where hupotassō is

Here's a great definition of submission from the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*: **“Submission refers to a wife’s divine calling to honor and affirm her husband’s leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts. It is not an absolute surrender of her will. Rather, we speak of her disposition to yield to her husband’s guidance and her inclination to follow his leadership.”**¹⁸

So “submission” means following the lead of a husband. It means that when husband and wife reach an impasse in terms of decision-making, God wants the husband to take the initiative and lovingly lead his wife and his children forward.¹⁹

The word we use to describe this dynamic in conservative Christian circles is complementarity. Men and women fulfill complementary roles in the Christian family. And having properly ordered homes where husbands lead, and wives follow, is pleasing to God and better serves the dynamics of family life.²⁰ It is “fitting in the Lord.”²¹

Do men sometimes lead badly? Yes. Do husbands make mistakes? Yes. Do wayward and irresponsible men invalidate or nullify God’s instructions in the Scriptures? No.

Several years ago, I read about Queen Elizabeth II and her marriage to Prince Philip. When they got married, they debated the clause in the Anglican wedding ceremony where the wife is called to submit to the husband. The issue was this: How could the Queen of England, and the head of the church in Anglican theology, be reasonably expected to submit to her husband? Should that clause be taken out?

Well, Queen Elizabeth, to her credit, left that clause in. She was a devout, God-fearing woman. And despite the challenge that it would create, she felt it was better to obey the tenets of Scripture that had been implemented in the marriage ceremony. Whatever challenges it would create for her queenship, she would have to sort that out.

Someone might respond to **verse 18** by saying, **“Pastor Tony, submission is a hard concept to embrace and practice in this modern-day world.”** I agree. But I would add that it can’t be any harder for a woman to embrace and practice today than it was for the Queen of England. If she could embrace it and figure it out, we can too.

And speaking of the modern-day world, let me just say this as well. We live in a day where people, for whatever reason, are trying to blur the lines between man and woman, husband and wife. We’ve got men pretending to be women, and women pretending to be men. Men are pretending to marry men, and women are pretending to marry women. And the world is fawning all over that like it’s something amazing, even though it’s incredibly dangerous and incredibly harmful to those individuals and others.²² I would just say, **“I don’t really want to follow the path of the modern-day world, thank you very much. I think there’s good reason to lean into conservative complementarianism right now.”**

I’ve told this story before. When Sanja and I got married, Sanja already had a college degree and an MBA. She had a good-paying job at a local CPA firm. She had moved from Croatia to America at age 17 and figured out how to be successful in the English-speaking business world of America—no small feat. I, on the other hand, had barely graduated from college. I was an underpaid youth pastor, looking

applied to a relationship between persons, and where it does not carry this sense of being *subject to an authority*’ (italics his). Even the call to ‘submit to one another’ (Eph 5:21) is meaningful only if this common usage is assumed.”

18 See *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (revised edition), edited by Wayne Grudem and John Piper (Crossway, 2021), 61.

19 For more on this, see my sermon, “What Is a Wife?,” in the *Marriage and Our Maker* series, preached at Messiah Bible Church on March 6, 2024, accessed at <https://www.messiahbible.org/marriage-and-our-maker-what-is-a-wife> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCq9dnJav0w&t=2s>.

20 Despite the suggestion of some, Christian women are not enslaved to their husbands. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

21 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 167: “When a woman submits to the loving leadership of her husband and follows God’s intention for her, she is fulfilled and so is the husband. Efforts to reverse or confuse the duties of wife and husband destroy the blessing each is to be to the other.”

22 For details on how this is harmful to children, see Katy Faust and Stacy Manning, *Them Before Us: Why We Need a Global Children’s Rights Movement* (Post Hill Press, 2021).

for a second job. When people looked in on our situation, they would have said, “That guy should submit to her authority, not her to his.” And yet, that’s not what God required of us. I needed to step it up as a husband and as a leader. And Sanja was called to submit to my leadership.

This is “fitting in the Lord.” And here’s the other side of that. Paul says in **verse 19**.²³

¹⁹ *Husbands, love²⁴ your wives,²⁵ and do not be harsh²⁶ with them.²⁷*

In ancient Roman society, you had something called the *paterfamilias*. This was the understanding that men were to lead their homes, their families, and their wives. But you never had in any ancient society this command to “love your wife.” This is distinctively biblical in the ancient world.

And Paul’s words here echo the language of **Ephesians 5**.²⁸ “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (**Eph 5:25**).²⁹ Paul said there that wives are to “submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord... as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (**Eph 5:22, 24**). Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 11:3**, “Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman.”³⁰ This is an important Christian ethic in the NT. Peter affirms something similar in **1 Peter 3:1–7**.

But Paul adds a different wrinkle here in **Colossians**. He says, “**As part of your role as a Christ-imitating man who is loving a wife like Christ loves the church... a wife who voluntarily submits herself**

23 CHRYSOSTOM: “From being loved, the wife too becomes loving; and from her being submissive, the husband learns to yield.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 51.

24 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 168–9: “The present tense of the imperative *agapate* (love) indicates continuous action. The verb itself seems best understood in the New Testament to express a willing love, not the love of passion or emotion, but the love of choice—a covenant kind of love. It could be translated, ‘keep on loving.’ The love that existed from the start of the marriage is to continue throughout the marriage; it must not give way to bitterness. The willing, covenant love in view here is the activity of self-sacrifice. It is a deep affection that views the wife as a sister in the Lord and the object of a promise to be kept. The love that Paul commands sees the wife as a weaker vessel to be cared for while at the same time a fellow-heir to grace (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7), a best friend, and life-partner.”

25 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 120: “It is unthinkable absurd for a Christian husband to demand submission of his wife if he is not radically loving her; likewise, it is errant logic for a wife who is not submissive to demand such love.”

26 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 303: “*Be harsh* translates a verb whose basic sense is ‘make bitter.’ The verb occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only with a physical sense: water (Rev. 8:11) or the stomach (Rev. 10:9, 10) is turned ‘bitter’ or ‘sour.’ The corresponding noun is used four times, in each case condemning an attitude of bitterness (Acts 8:23; Rom. 3:14; Eph. 4:31; Heb. 12:15), while the adjective occurs twice, once with reference to ‘bitter’ (as opposed to sweet or fresh) water (Jas. 3:11) and once modifying ‘envy’ (Jas. 3:14). Words from the Greek root of the word used here occur in other ancient Greek writings to refer to rulership that is domineering and harsh. Paul is probably reflecting this tradition, urging husbands not to act with a heart of bitterness toward their wives.”

27 JOHANN AGRICOLA: “It sounds rather strange that we should command husbands that they should love their wives, as if they don’t love their wives enough. Nevertheless it is a needed instruction which summarizes the entire relationship of husbands to their wives... husbands are commanded that in all their words, works, signs and interactions they should demonstrate their love to their wives, so that a wife could not interpret all that her husband does with her in any other way than that her husband intends to be honest and good to her.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 233.

28 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 303: “Why are only husbands urged to love their wives? The pattern of requiring submission of the wife and love of the husband is consistent in the New Testament (see also Eph. 5:22–25; in 1 Pet. 3:1–7, wives are urged to ‘submit’ and husbands to live considerately with their wives and respect them). Perhaps this pattern reflects the particular susceptibilities of each partner in the relationship: wives may be tempted to chafe under the ‘headship’ of their husbands; and husbands are prone to abuse their leadership role.”

29 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 302: “Requiring wives to submit to husbands, as we have noted, matches widespread Greek and Jewish teaching about marriage. Requiring husbands to love their wives does not... no other code we have discovered from the ancient world requires husbands to love their wives.”

30 HEINRICH BULLINGER: “The husband is placed before the wife not so that he might exercise tyranny over her but so that he may pay attention to her salvation, encourage her learning, protect her, nourish her and treat her tenderly... The head is to be wise, not foolish. He is to guide, without being furious or wild... I do not want certain pernicky and argumentative women to raise their plumes. It would be better if they would listen to what the apostle said, that just as the church defers to Christ, so wives should defer to their husbands in all things.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 232.

to your authority... let me be absolutely clear about this... don't you dare be harsh with them, husbands."³¹

Was this a problem in the church in Colossae? Were there harsh husbands in the Colossian church? I don't know. Has this been a problem for husbands through history? Yes, it has. When husbands behave badly, they brutalize and polygamize and verbally abuse their wives. Paul says, **"Don't you do that in the church, husband!"**

"What do I do, then Paul?"

"Here's what you do! You ἀγαπάω (agapaō)!³² You show her *agape* love! You love your wife as Christ loves the church. You sacrifice for her. You die to yourself for the benefit of your wife and your children. Jesus never abuses his church! Jesus never abandons her or berates her or demeans her! He's never harsh with her. Jesus is the example in all these things."

Whenever I do a wedding as a pastor, here's something that I say. I say this at every wedding I do. I say to the groom, "[Groom], the Bible teaches that husbands are called to lead their homes. So you [Tom, Dick, Harry, whatever your name is!] lead well. Your wife doesn't need you to be her Messiah. Jesus is her Messiah. But you are called to love her like her Messiah loves her. You are called to lead humbly and sacrificially. And this bride is making a vow today to follow your leadership and to go where you lead. So be a good caretaker of your wife's heart."

Is the groom listening when I say those things at the wedding? Probably not. He's too busy admiring his bride. Besides, we covered that already in premarital counseling. But I say it anyway for the benefit of the people who are married and listening in at the wedding.³³

So in a properly ordered family, you have a wife that submits. You have a husband who leads. The next practical question is, **"What about the kids?"**

What about the kids? Look at verse 20.

²⁰ Children,³⁴ obey³⁵ your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.³⁶

31 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 300: "As the husband loves his wife, he will often, in effect, 'put himself under' her, deferring to her interests and needs (Phil. 2:3–4). But this 'submission' of the husband to the wife is of a different character than the submission required of the wife to the husband. In this latter sense, the wife 'puts herself under' her husband in recognizing and living out an 'order' established by God himself within the marriage relationship (and by extension, in the family of God, the church)."

32 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 248: "ἀγαπάω plays the role in 3:19 of 'in the Lord' in 3:18 and 20 and is itself sufficient to refer the reader back to the traditions of Jesus as the Christ and Lord (2:6–7)."

33 For more on the role of a husband, see my sermon, "What is a Husband?," in the *Marriage and Our Maker* series, preached at Messiah Bible Church on February 28, 2024, accessed at <https://www.messiahbible.org/marriage-and-our-maker-what-is-a-husband> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzI-SfdeCvc>.

34 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 304: "It is possible that Paul's exhortation applies to all children, of any age. On the other hand, the comparable text in Ephesians, after urging children to obey their parents, requires that fathers 'bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord' (6:4). This language suggests that the concern is with young children."

35 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 170: "That children are to honor and obey their parents is taught repeatedly in Scripture. It appears in the Ten Commandments: 'Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you' (Ex. 20:12). Striking or cursing one's parents was punishable by death in the Old Testament (Ex. 21:15–17; Lev. 20:9), as was continued disobedience (Deut. 21:18–21). Children are to listen to their parents' instruction and obey it (Prov. 1:8; 6:20). The consequences of disrespect for parents are graphically portrayed in Proverbs 30:17: 'The eye that mocks a father, and scorns a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it' (cf. Matt. 15:4–5; Mark 7:10–13). Disobedience to parents marks the ungodly: 'Men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy' (2 Tim. 3:2; cf. Rom. 1:30)."

36 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 305–6: "The wording of the Greek suggests that Paul is not so much saying that 'this is pleasing to the Lord' but that it is pleasing 'in the Lord,' that is, the obedience of children is appropriate behavior within the community that acknowledges Christ as their Lord (see NRSV; NET; HCSB). Paul may emphasize this point in opposition to some 'enthusiastic' Christians who might have dismissed such mundane and hierarchical ideas as a wife's submission to her husband or a child's obedience of parents as inappropriate for the new humanity being created in and by Christ. On the contrary, Paul may be responding, these family obligations continue to be required in the new community."

Children in the room, let me talk to you for a moment. When you obey your parents you are pleasing the Lord and doing right by them. You are obeying the fifth commandment. You are honoring them. And it's God's will for your life to honor them and obey them.³⁷

Do parents make mistakes? Yes. Are parents perfect? No. Will your parents give you commands at times that you think are ridiculous and are hard to obey? Yes. That's part of what motivates kids to grow up, move out, and start their own families.

But when you obey your parents in everything, you are pleasing the Lord. **When Alastair was little, we used to sing this song together,**

Children obey your parents in the Lord.

Children obey your parents in the Lord.

For this is right. For this is right.

Children obey your parents, in the Lord.

You know what that is, parents? That's good, old-fashioned brainwashing. It's the same thing that Taylor Swift does. We just did it better than her.

Parents, let me talk to you for a moment. When you require your children to obey you, you are doing right. That is a right and good way to honor the Lord and do what's best for your children. Children don't thrive when their parents are spineless jellyfish. Children don't thrive when parents want to be their kids' friends instead of the authority in their lives. Children need strong, disciplinarian parents.³⁸

Now, let's be clear. Do parents need to be *disobeyed* sometimes when they require their children to do evil? Yes.³⁹ We must obey God rather than men (**Acts 5:29**).⁴⁰ Some children come to Christ despite the explicit instructions of their parents.⁴¹ Are they wrong for that? No.⁴²

37 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 171: "Many young people struggle with knowing God's will for their lives. Obeying their parents is the right place to start."

38 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 123: "An evidence of being a child of God is God's discipline. So it is with human fathers. The absence of discipline means fatherhood is not being practiced, and weak, inconsistent discipline shows a lack of love. Discipline is therefore a key to child-parent fullness!"

39 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 248: "Christian pressure ... took the power away from fathers to expose unwanted infants some three centuries later (in 374; earlier Jewish and Christian protest in pseudo-Phocylides 185; Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.110; *Barnabas* 19:5)."

40 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 170–1: "The only limit placed on a child's obedience is when a parent demands something contrary to God's law. Jesus knew that some children would have to defy their parents to come to faith in Him. In Luke 12:51–53 our Lord says, 'Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.' Later in Luke 14:26 He says, '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.' Salvation can bring a breach in the family so that children may have to reject their parents' commands if they are contrary to Scripture."

41 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 125: "We are never to go against our conscience or Scripture to obey anyone. Nor must we sin or do anything irrational or harmful to us or anyone else in carrying out parental obedience. The command is not a *carte blanche* for a cruel parent! But these cases aside, the Scripture before us says that obedience 'pleases the Lord.'"

42 JOHN CALVIN: "But what if parents want to force them to something unlawful? Will they in that case, too, obey without any reservation? Now it would be worse than cruel for human authority to prevail at the expense of neglecting God. I answer that here, too, we must understand as implied what he expresses elsewhere, namely, 'in the Lord.' ... But why the universal particle ['in everything']? I answer again that it demonstrates that they must be obedient not merely to fair commands but also to unfair commands. For many make themselves compliant with the wishes of their parents only where the command is not burdensome or inconvenient. But now this one thing ought to be considered by children. Whoever their parents may be, they have been granted to them by God's providence, who by his ordination makes children subject to their parents. 'In all things,' therefore, that is, they may not refuse anything, however difficult or disagreeable. 'In all things,' that is, in things indifferent they should show deference to their parents." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 233.

Do wives need to be unsubmitive when their husbands ask them to do something that defies God? Yes. They must obey God rather than men (**Acts 5:29**).⁴³ The lesser of two evils is disobeying the human authority instead of the divine authority. The greater of the two goods is submitting to God instead of submitting to humans, when those two things are in conflict.

But listen, those are hard cases. And hard cases make bad law. Some parents shouldn't be parents, and they need to be removed from that role. But that doesn't negate or nullify the goodness of God's ideal for the Christian family.

And speaking of parents, Paul says in **verse 21**.

²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children,⁴⁴ lest they become discouraged.⁴⁵*

The word for "fathers" here is the Greek *πατήρ* (*patēr*), which could be translated "parents." In fact, this word is used for "parents" in **Hebrews 11:23**, speaking of Moses's parents. But I don't think that's what Paul is conveying here. If he wanted to say "parents" here, he would have used the same word in **verse 20**, *γονεός* (*goneus*). "Children, obey your (*γονεός*) in everything, for this pleases the Lord." So Paul pivots from "parents" (*γονεός*) to "fathers" (*πατήρ*).⁴⁶ Why?

I don't know why. But probably Paul realizes that in the majority of cases where parents do badly and provoke and discourage their children, it's a father, not a mother. **So fathers, this is good medicine from Scripture for you. Receive it.**⁴⁷

⁴³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 168: "There may be times when a wife must refuse to submit to her husband's desires (if they violate God's Word). Finally, the husband's authority is not to be exercised in an authoritative, overbearing manner. The wife's submission takes place in the context of a loving relationship."

⁴⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 307: "The text most relevant to Colossians 3:21... —and one that Paul may well have had in mind—is Deuteronomy 21:20, where parents are charged with bringing a disobedient son before the elders and proclaiming, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious (LXX, *erethizei*). He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.' Paul, in effect, is exhorting fathers to raise their children in such a way that they do their utmost to avoid provoking this kind of rebellious attitude in them."

⁴⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 252: "Without strong parental encouragement they could easily become 'discouraged' (RSV). The psychological sensitivity displayed here is remarkably modern."

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 123: "Under a section of Roman law entitled *Patria Potestas*, 'The Power of the Father,' the father could do anything he wanted with his children. He could sell them, turn them into slaves, even take their lives. But here, as with husbands and wives, both children and parents were presented as under God. The dominating example was the loving Fatherhood of God."

⁴⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 171–3: "There are several ways parents can cause their children to lose heart. First, parents can exasperate their children by overprotection. Overprotective parents never allow their children any liberty. They have strict rules about everything. No matter what their children do, overprotective parents do not trust them. Because nothing they do earns their parents' trust, children begin to despair and may believe that how they behave is irrelevant. That can lead to rebellion. Parents are to provide rules and guidelines for their children, but those rules should not become a noose that strangles them. Above all, parents must communicate to their children that they trust them. Second, parents exasperate their children by showing favoritism. That is often done unwittingly by comparing a child unfavorably to siblings or classmates. By making a child feel like the black sheep of the family, parents can create a terrible sense of frustration. Third, parents exasperate their children by depreciating their worth. Many children have been convinced that what they do and feel are not important. That is communicating to children that they are not significant. Many parents depreciate their children's worth by refusing to listen to them. Children who are not listened to may give up trying to communicate and become discouraged, shy, and withdrawn. Fourth, parents exasperate their children by setting unrealistic goals. Parents can do that by never rewarding them, or never letting them feel they have succeeded. Nothing is enough, so the children never get full approval. Such parents are often trying to make their children into something they themselves were not. The results can be tragic. Some children become so frustrated that they commit suicide. Fifth, parents exasperate their children by failing to show affection. Parents need to communicate love to their children both verbally and physically. Failing to do so will discourage and alienate a child. Sixth, some parents exasperate their children by not providing for their needs. Children need things like privacy, a place to play, clean clothes, a place to study, their own possessions, and good meals. By providing those necessities, parents show their respect and concern for their children. Seventh, parents exasperate their children by a lack of standards. This is the flip side of overprotection. When parents fail to discipline, or discipline inconsistently, children are left on their own. They cannot handle that kind of freedom and begin to feel insecure and unloved. Eighth, parents exasperate their children by criticism... Parents should seek to create in the home a positive, constructive environment. Ninth, parents exasperate their children by neglect. The classic biblical example is Absalom. David was indifferent to him, and the result was rebellion, civil war, and Absalom's death. Parents need to be

do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.⁴⁸

John Newton, the great preacher and hymn-writer, said once, “I know that my father loved me—but he did not seem to wish me to see it.”⁴⁹ **Parents in the room, and dads in particular, don’t leave your children in any doubt, either by your actions, or by your words, that you love them. Tell them that often. And show them that often.**⁵⁰

And by the way, part of what’s required of a father... one of the things that is implicit to Paul’s instructions here is that fathers are active and present in the lives of their children. That was so much of an expectation in the first century world, even among heathens, that Paul doesn’t even have to say anything about that.⁵¹

But in our day, we’ve got to say something about it, because fatherlessness isn’t just a problem; it’s an epidemic. And children sometimes are viewed not as a blessing from the Lord, but as a burden. Children are seen as a drain on resources, and families who have many children are chided for being a drain on the economy and the ecosystem. That mentality is thoroughly unbiblical. It defies the creation mandate.

The infamous eugenicist **Margeret Sanger** said once, “**The most serious evil of our times is that of encouraging the bringing into the world of large families. The most immoral practice of the day is breeding too many children.**”⁵²

And yet, the Bible says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:3–5).

Yes, children are a gift from God. They are a heritage. But they are also a trust. We are called to discipline them and raise them and disciple them and teach them to fear God. And as part of that Paul commands fathers, “Do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” **Dads in the room, take that to heart.**⁵³

Write this down as a second point in your notes. After dealing with our family ethic, now Paul wants to deal with our work ethic. So write this down as #2 in your notes.

- 1) Christian families should be **ordered** properly (3:18–21)
- 2) Christian work should be **wholehearted** (3:22–25)

involved in their children’s lives. Finally, parents exasperate their children by excessive discipline. This is the parent who abuses his children, either verbally, emotionally, or physically. Parents often say things to their children that they would never say to anyone else. They should never discipline their children in anger. Rather, parents should lovingly correct their children, just as their heavenly Father does them.”

48 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 126: “Parents, fathers, discipline is to be given, but so is encouragement. Obedience is to be nurtured by love and praise. We must never cause our children to ‘lose heart.’”

49 Quoted in Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 126.

50 JOHANN AGRICOLA: “We find some hotheads who are so harsh with their children that their children would rather run through fire than cross their father. Such fear remains in them that their entire life they must remain witless, bumbling people... We should not be too harsh with children, nor should we be too lenient, since each will suffer naturally. Rather we should treat them honorably in a disciplined and rational fashion, not just with force, stress, and terror.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 234.

51 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 243–4: “In the classic definition of Aristotle, the household was the basic unit of the state. As part of good ordering, therefore, it was necessary to deal with its basic relationships: ‘master and slave, husband and wife, father and children’ (*Politica* I.1253b.1–14; Balch, *Wives* 33–34)... Study of such parallels, however, should be sufficient to warn us of the danger of speaking as though there was in the ancient world an established form of ‘household rules’ from which Col. 3:18–4:1 has been derived (the Colossian code is itself the ‘purest’ form!)... there are also clearly distinctive Christian features, most notably the sevenfold reference to ‘the Lord,’ that is, Christ (3:18, 20, 22–24; 4:1).”

52 See her *Woman and the New Race*, (New York: Brentano’s, 1920), Chapter 5: “The Wickedness of Creating Large Families.” Accessed here: <https://www.bartleby.com/1013/5.html>.

53 For more on the role of a parent, see my sermon, “Marriage, Our Maker, and Our Children,” in the *Marriage and Our Maker* series, preached at Messiah Bible Church on April 10, 2024, accessed at <https://www.messiahbible.org/marriage-and-our-maker-marriage-our-make-and-children> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wRfuwBFAIw&t=3349s>.

Both of these, as I've said already, are an outworking of our worship. Both of these are expressions of what Paul said earlier, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Paul says in **verse 22**,

²² *Bondservants,⁵⁴ obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.*

Now let's deal with the elephant in the room, before we drill down more specifically on this passage and how to apply it in our lives. Paul says "bondservants" in **verse 22**.⁵⁵ The Greek word is δοῦλος (*doulos*), and it refers to slaves. And slaves have masters.⁵⁶ And this was an inescapable part of the first century world.⁵⁷ Slavery as a concept and a practice is as old as ancient history. It has universally been part of our world all around the world. The anomaly throughout human history isn't *slavery*, it's *abolition*.

And so here we are. **We live in a day and in a country where—thanks to the courage of people like William Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and the reformed slave trader turned pastor John Newton—slavery as a practice has been abolished. And that's a wonderful thing.**

But Paul didn't live in that world. Slavery was an ever-present reality in his day. Precise numbers are impossible to determine, but historians estimate that millions of people were enslaved throughout the Roman Empire. And there were probably several slaves as well as masters in the church in Colossae.⁵⁸

And just to be clear, Roman slavery differed in important respects from the race-based chattel slavery practiced in the United States before the Civil War. The slavery practiced in this country and elsewhere in the Atlantic world was especially heinous because it involved the kidnapping, trafficking, and hereditary enslavement of a particular race of people (Africans and their descendants). The situation was different in the Roman world. Roman slavery was not based primarily on race, though it was still a cruel institution. Was slavery still appalling and oppressive in many cases? Absolutely. Enslaved people could be bought and sold, separated from their families, abused, and forced into hard labor. Is society better off without that practice? Absolutely. But Paul's not addressing that topic and that injustice directly in this book.

He does address it more in the book of **Philemon**, which, if you remember was delivered at the same time to the same church in Colossae. Paul sent the runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his slave master, Philemon.⁵⁹ And one of the things that he says to Philemon in that book is, **"Philemon, you need to forgive, Onesimus. Onesimus is your brother in Christ. And you need to treat him as such."**

⁵⁴ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 271: "This discussion is expected in Hellenistic discussions of household relationships since a 'complete household consists of slaves and freemen' (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1253b). Unlike 'wives' and 'children,' 'slaves' are considered 'an animate article of property' (*Pol.* 1253b). As such, a 'slave is not only the slave of his master; he also belongs entirely to him' (*Pol.* 1254a). As 'an animate article of property,' they are considered unable to take part in rational discourse: 'The slave is entirely without the faculty of deliberation; the female indeed possesses it, but in a form which remains inconclusive; and if children also possess it, it is only in an immature form' (*Pol.* 1260a). Although Aristotle's detailed treatment of slavery in the fourth century BC may not represent the common perception in Paul's day, these statements do reflect the sentiments among many in the first century AD."

⁵⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 308: "It is significant that Paul chooses to address slaves at all, implying not only that they are assembled with the other Christians of the Colossian church to hear the letter being read but that they are responsible people who need to choose a certain kind of behavior. Second, Paul clearly relativizes the status of the slave's master by repeatedly reminding both slave (vv. 22, 23, 24) and master (4:1) of the ultimate 'master' to whom both are responsible: the Lord Jesus Christ... Paul never hints that he endorses the institution of slavery. He tells slaves and masters how they are to conduct themselves within the institution, but it is a bad misreading of Paul to read into his teaching approval of the institution itself."

⁵⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 252: "It is important to remember that they, too, would be counted as part of the well-to-do household, an integral part of its good functioning (like domestic servants in Victorian Britain)."

⁵⁷ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 130: "The advice Paul gives here was ultimately revolutionary, because in time it brought the downfall of slavery as an institution. But it was also immediately revolutionary in that it brought fullness to the Christian's life, whether slave or master."

⁵⁸ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 129: "Ancient historians estimate that there were some 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, or about one-half the population. Because of this, work was considered below the dignity of the slave-owning Roman free man. Practically everything was done by slaves, even doctoring and teaching."

Now some people might ask, “**Does the Apostle Paul give tacit approval to slavery in his writings? In the book of Colossians and in the book of Philemon?**” I don’t think so.⁶⁰ I think Paul was dealing with the world as it was.⁶¹ Ancient Rome was not a democratic republic. And rebellion against the status quo in that day would have led to unnecessary bloodshed and persecution for the church.⁶²

And Paul has already done a fair amount to flatten the distinction between slave and free. He said earlier that both slave and free are welcomed into the Christian community that is “being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” In the book of **Galatians**, which Paul wrote years earlier, he said that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (3:28).

And Paul presses that point home more forcefully in the book of **Philemon**.⁶³ I heard one pastor say that the book of **Philemon** is ultimately a book about reconciliation, not slavery. But even if that book (and the rest of the NT) doesn’t address the issue of slavery head on, it does implicitly fight against that practice.

As an American, I wish that we as a nation had addressed the issue of slavery earlier than we did. Because slavery, as it was practiced in this country and others, is an ungodly and abominable practice. Again, thank God it has been abolished.

So when we read **verse 22**, I think we should do two things. I think we should praise God that the bondservant/master relationship isn’t applicable in our world. But we should still look to apply these verses because, as **2 Timothy 3:16–17** says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

So, let’s look at the text again.

59 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 129: “If a slave ran away, he was branded on the forehead with the letter F for *Fugitivus* and sometimes even put to death, with no trial.”

60 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 174: “It should be noted that although the Word of God never advocates slavery, it does recognize it as an element of society that could be beneficial if both slaves and masters treated each other as they should. Far from seeking to abolish slavery, the Lord and the apostles use it as a motif for spiritual instruction, by likening the believer, one who belongs to Christ and serves Him, to a slave. So New Testament literature accepts slavery as a social reality and seeks to instruct those in that system to behave in a godly manner.”

61 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 253: “This should not be criticized today as merely social conformism; those who live in modern social democracies, in which interest groups can hope to exert political pressure by intensive lobbying, should remember that in the cities of Paul’s day the great bulk of Christians would have had no possibility whatsoever of exerting any political pressure for any particular policy or reform.”

62 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 296–7: “Do the household codes support, by implication, the continuing existence of the institution of slavery as part of the ‘right order’ of society? The codes have often been read as if such were the case, with interpreters then drawing two opposite conclusions: (1) the New Testament does not, in fact, oppose all forms of slavery; or (2) the household codes must be relativized in some way, since biblical principles clearly outlaw all forms of slavery. We certainly agree that slavery is ultimately incompatible with consistent biblical teaching, and it is to the church’s great discredit that it took so long to recognize that fact. But must we then ‘relativize’ the teaching in these passages? We answer ‘no’—but with a caveat. We answer negatively simply because the logic set out above makes a crucial, but, in our view, wrong assumption: that these passages endorse slavery. They do not. They simply address an institution that happened to be a significant element of ancient society. For various reasons, some theological and some practical, the New Testament writers do not attack the institution of slavery as such... The household codes are practical and specific: they require believers who occupy these roles to relate to each other in certain ways. Whether those roles should continue or are endorsed by the author or by God is simply not in view. Other biblical texts make clear enough that marriage (wives and husbands) and the family (children and fathers) are to endure as long as this world lasts. There is nothing even approaching any such endorsement of slavery, however.”

63 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 297: “While the silence of the New Testament on the *institution* of slavery is not unexpected, it is somewhat perplexing that the New Testament never calls on Christian slave owners to release their slaves from their bondage. Again, there are reasons for this silence (see once more the Introduction to Philemon, 369–78). But we might also tentatively suggest that the New Testament writers themselves had not yet worked out the full implications of their own theology on this matter.”

²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly⁶⁴ masters,⁶⁵ not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers,⁶⁶ but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Praise God that we don't have bondservants and masters in our society. But we do have hierarchy. We do have employee and employer relationships. And in light of that, let me utilize a "how much more?" argument in light of that. This is what the Hebrews of old called a "qal wahomer" argument or a "how much more" argument. Jesus did this all the time.

If bondservants in the first century were called to serve their masters with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord, how much more should we as employees serve our employers with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord.⁶⁷ Everyone with me?

We don't serve by way of eye-service. We don't serve well and obey only when we are being watched.⁶⁸ And we don't serve as people-pleasers or brownnosers or corporate-ladder climbers. We serve our employers with sincerity of heart. We serve well because it's right and good to honor authority. And we do it ultimately for the Lord. We fear God, and we believe we will be rewarded by God for it.

And speaking of that, look at **verse 23**.

²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,⁶⁹

That word "heartily" there is actually the Greek word for soul. "**Work soulfully,**" says Paul.⁷⁰ Work hard with your whole soul as if you are working for the Lord, which ultimately you actually are. Because the Lord will reward you.⁷¹

²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

⁶⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 253–4: "Even though their masters are masters κατὰ σάρκα, they must nevertheless be obeyed in everything. But it provides an effective reminder that even caught as they were in such relationships, slaves could enjoy another set of relationships (κατὰ πνεῦμα) in which Christ was κύριος and all "in him" were brothers and sisters (including the earthly masters)."

⁶⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 255n29: "That 'in the Lord' is not used of the third sequence of relationships (slaves and masters), as of the other two (3:18, 20), is no more significant than the fact that the phrase is used only of wives and children and not of husbands/fathers."

⁶⁶ HUGH LATIMER: "That servant is a good gospeler who will not be an eye-servant. There are some servants who do their duties as long as their master is in sight, but as soon as their master is gone, they play the lubbers. To such fellows I say, 'Beware!' For though your bodily master sees you not, your great Master, God, sees you and will punish you." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, RCS, 234.

⁶⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 311: "The 'fear of the Lord' is, of course, a prominent theme in the Old Testament, combining a sense of appropriate awe in the presence of God with submission to his will. But the theme is by no means absent from the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Pet. 2:17; Rev. 11:18; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5), where, in a move typical of the 'christological monotheism' of the early church, the Lord is sometimes defined as Christ (Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:21). This is certainly the case here, as the high Christology of the letter to the Colossians as a whole is again brought to bear on the ordinary situation of the Christian household."

⁶⁸ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 130–1: "We all know what that is like. In gym class, when the coach is watching there are perfect pushups. But when he looks away... Eye service results in half-done jobs. The room is swept, but the dirt is brushed under the carpet. Work breaks extend until the boss returns. This is not the way it is supposed to be."

⁶⁹ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 132: "The apostle's teaching here is not a call to overwork or workaholism. Correct as the Biblical ethic is, capitalism was and is easily perverted to the worship of work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, providing theological guise for addiction to wealth, power, and the exploitation of workers."

⁷⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 311: "In v. 22 'heart' translates *kardia*, whereas here it translates *psychē*, the word often translated 'soul.' The two words are essentially interchangeable in a context such as this. Both of them indicate the true and authentic inner person: something done 'from the soul' is something 'done from the vital heart of the person, with all the individual's life force behind it.' Our phrase 'from the heart' captures the idea very well (see also NAB; and NJB, 'put your heart into it')."

⁷¹ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 131: "I have known some who have gotten themselves in trouble with fellow-workers because, in respect to this principle, they worked hard and were honest about their hours. Some hard-working Christians have even lost their jobs due to the lies said about them by their peers. Yet, we must obey the Lord."

That was true for the first century slave. It's also true for the twenty-first century employee. **It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. I get it. Employees are often overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. You get laid off, downsized, and demoted. Your job gets eliminated, outsourced, or replaced by AI.**

Sixteen tons and what do you get

Another day older and deeper in debt

And yet, still, Scripture holds.

work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance⁷² as your reward.⁷³ You are serving⁷⁴ the Lord Christ.*

Notice if you will “the Lord Christ” at the end of **verse 24**. For those who would suggest that the Bible never affirms the deity of Christ, behold, I give you **Colossians 3:24**.

You are serving⁷⁵ the Lord Christ.⁷⁶

Work as unto the Lord, Christian. That's your mentality every time you go into work and work an 8-hour, 10-hour, or 12-hour shift. I'm serving the Lord Christ. I'm serving the Lord Christ.

And after the positive reinforcement of hard work and submission in **verse 24**, Paul gives some negative reinforcement too. Look at **verse 25**.

²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back⁷⁷ for the wrong he has done,⁷⁸ and there is no partiality.⁷⁹*

God is no respecter of persons. He will judge each man and woman according to their deeds without partiality.⁸⁰

⁷² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 257: “The paradox of slaves becoming heirs of God’s kingdom would not be lost on the Colossians. Under Roman law slaves could not inherit anything; so it was only by being integrated into this distinctively Jewish heritage that their legal disability as slaves could be surmounted.”

⁷³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 257: “Slaves would need to keep reminding themselves that their loyalty to Christ transcended their loyalty to their masters, thus making it easier to bear the harsher features of their enslavement.”

⁷⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 313–4: “It should be noted at this point that the usual translation ‘serve’ for this verb misses the connotation of bond service that the Greek verb suggests: *douleō* and its cognate, *doulos*, are the standard ways of referring to slavery in ancient Greek and in the New Testament. It is tempting, therefore, to translate, with the NAB, ‘Be slaves of the Lord Christ.’ Unfortunately, this rendering, particularly against the backdrop of nineteenth-century American slavery, might be too strong. In any case, in this context Paul is obviously reminding the slaves that their true and ultimate ‘master’ is Christ, not the earthly master to whom they are enslaved. They need to serve the Lord Christ not only in order to receive their inheritance but also to avoid punishment for doing wrong (v. 25).”

⁷⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 313: “The verb that Paul uses here (*douleuete*) can also be read as an imperative, and, somewhat surprisingly, the commentators are generally out of step with the translations, favoring the imperative rendering by a large margin... the imperative better explains the way this clause sits in its context.”

⁷⁶ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 317: “Slaves and masters ultimately serve the same Lord, and that fundamental spiritual reality not only relativizes their earthly relationship but even sets the stage for its abolishment.”

⁷⁷ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 256: “The double prefix, ‘give back (ἀπό) in return (ἀντί)’ (‘exact requital,’ Lightfoot 227), suggests that the lot of many slaves was so harsh that the Christian promise of a future inheritance to compensate for such wholehearted obedience despite harsh treatment (cf. Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 2.90; 3.137–38; 1 Pet. 2:19–20) must have been very attractive to many slaves.”

⁷⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 258–9: “The assurance, be it noted, is *not* that God will be especially favourable to those who have worshiped him or believed in his Christ. It is rather that there is a God-given justice among peoples and individuals determined by God and that those who ignore or flout it cannot expect to escape the consequences, whether slaves or masters (cf. again Eph. 6:9).”

⁷⁹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 316: “The word *favoritism* translates a Greek word that means, literally, ‘receiving the face’; the Greek word is a (literal) translation of a Hebrew idiom. It means treating people on the basis of (mere) appearance and is thus accurately translated ‘favoritism’ or ‘partiality’ (NRSV; ESV; NASB; NAB). As the quotation above suggests, the word occurs elsewhere in Ephesians 6:9 and also in Romans 2:11 and James 2:1 (the cognate verb occurs in Jas. 2:9 and the cognate adjective in Acts 10:34).”

⁸⁰ Keener, *The IVPBNCNT*, Col 4:1: “Some Greek and Roman philosophers warned that masters themselves could become slaves someday (unlikely as this was), so they should treat their slaves rightly. Aristotle attacked philosophers in his own day who said that slavery was against nature and therefore wrong. By contrast, Paul clearly believes all people are by nature equal before God; although he does not address slavery as an institution here, what he does write thus suggests that he does not favor it. Although he has no control over the system, he can warn masters to keep in mind their status before God.”

In response to **verse 25**, you might ask, **“Who is Paul talking about there? The bad master or the bad slave? In our context, the bad employer or the bad employee?”** I think he’s referencing both. Nobody gets away with evil. The lazy employee will be punished and so will the harsh employer.

In fact, you can draw a line from **verse 18** all the way to **verse 25** and say more broadly that nobody gets away with evil. The bad spouse will be punished eventually. There is no partiality. The bad parent will be punished eventually. There is no partiality. The disobedient child will be punished eventually. There is no partiality. The bad employee and employer will be punished eventually. There is no partiality. Nobody gets away with evil. Either in this world or in the world to come the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong done.⁸¹

And that leads to a third and final point. Paul says,

3) Christian masters should be **conscious** of their heavenly Master (4:1)

Paul says in chapter 4, verse 1.

¹ Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly,⁸² knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.⁸³

If **verse 25** was a threat, Paul doesn’t back off of that in **chapter 4, verse 1**. He doubles down. Masters, you have a Master! Watch yourself.

I can see Philemon squirming in his sandals in Colossae as Paul says this. Paul is saying, **“Watch yourself, Philemon. Treat your bondservant justly and fairly, just like you would want your Master in heaven to treat you.”**

And let me expound just a bit on what Paul is saying here and bring this entire passage together. Paul is saying something like this to all of us. Husbands, treat your wives justly and fairly, knowing that you have a heavenly husband waiting for you in eternity. Parents, treat your children justly and fairly, knowing that you have a heavenly parent and rewarder waiting for you in eternity. Employers, treat your employees justly and fairly, knowing that you have a heavenly employer and rewarder waiting for you in eternity.⁸⁴

One of the things that Paul is emphasizing in this final verse is that there’s a finality to these human relationships coming. Marriage is momentary. Sex and childrearing are temporary. Slave/master relationships won’t continue on into eternity. Employee/employer relationships won’t continue on into eternity.

Someday I will see Sanja in the New Jerusalem and I’ll say, “Hey, good to see you.” And I’ll see my son and say, “Another great day in paradise. Today’s even better than yesterday, and yesterday was fantastic.” And all of our affections and all of our worship and all of our attention will be drawn in perfect worship to our Master and our Savior and our Bridegroom, Jesus. Paul knows that. Paul knows that these temporary, earthly relationships won’t last forever.

But still, in the meantime, our families need to be ordered properly. Our work lives need to be ordered properly; they need to be wholehearted and dutiful. And we are called on this side of eternity to worship Christ in our families and in our workplaces. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (**Col 3:17**).

81 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 131: “All believers, though under the ultimate forgiveness of Christ, will have their works judged. ‘for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad’ (2 Corinthians 5:10).”

82 Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 259: “In this again there may be a conscious dependence on Jewish tradition, which in general treated slaves more favorably than most other traditions (Exod. 20:10; Lev. 25:43, 53).”

83 Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 133: “Under Roman law the slaves had no rights at all. So these words had a strange ring to non-Christians, and to the newly believing master. Also, given the social conditions of the times, this command may have been more difficult to carry out than what was asked of the slaves.”

84 MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 175: “The earthly master or boss may not give the servant what he deserves, but the Lord will. He is the One who will assure the eternal compensation is what it should be (cf. Rev. 20:12–13).”

