

“The New Self and the Christian Family”
Colossians 3:18-21

March 30, 2014

SI: One of the wonderful truths of the Gospel is that the Lord accepts us as we are. But it is also a wonderful truth that he accepts us as we are to change us from what we are into what we ought to be. And he expects our enthusiastic participation in that transformation.

The problem in the Colossian church was that there were all sorts of ideas and teachings going around that advocated various shortcuts to change, shortcuts to sanctification.

Things like special diets, religious rituals, keeping certain holy days, secret, esoteric Bible studies, mystical experiences, communication with angels.

Paul says all those are bogus.

There are no shortcuts or silver bullets.

The way forward in the Christian life is the way you got in—
by faith and repentance,
by experiencing and working out the reality of your union with Christ.

And in these verses Paul explains that one of the spheres of life where Christians change and help each other change is in the family.

INTRO: We live in strange and unhappy times.

Everywhere in the Western world, the family is disintegrating. And things will continue to get worse because the foundations of marriage and family life have been systematically undermined by powerful forces such as feminism, the sexual revolution, and intrusive federal government. It's not just women who have embraced feminism.

Men have embraced more enthusiastically than women, and for the same reason. It liberates them from the divine obligations of family life. More and more men are perfectly content to live without making a lifelong commitment to one woman. And more and more women, despairing of love and a happy home, are finding their careers also unable to fulfill longings of heart.

So feminism has not only crushed true romance and marriage roles and all the wonderful, attractive differences between men and women—it has also succeeded in giving us the absolute worst of both sexes. It has given us men who deny their responsibilities, and women who lapse into bitterness and despair. Social maladies obvious.

In addition to feminism, there is the grand political experiment to replace the nuclear family with the care of the state.

But it's been a disaster. In those communities most susceptible to manipulation by these government social experiments, family life has been destroyed.

Chris Granberry, our missionary on the Yakima Indian Reservation, once said that in his 12 years of working in that community, that he did not know of a single, intact family of married dad and mom with children living together. A few years ago a fire on the reservation burned down a number of houses and the result was over 100 homeless children—they were living by themselves.

A similar story could be told of the African American community—where just a few generations ago, marriage was valued and the vast majority of children born in intact homes.

But well-intentioned social programs undermined the dignity and worth black husbands and fathers. And when Uncle Sam is father and mother and family, children are born into a world where their lives are ruined before they have begun.

We are sheltered from the absolute worst of these changes.

But the upshot is that rather than bringing liberation and human flourishing—this undermining of sexuality, marriage, family have brought despair and death.

My sermon this morning is not going to be about anti-marriage and anti-family forces and how we push back against them.

We're going to look at these verses in the context of the letter and Paul's theology.

We're going to see how marriage and family fit into our sanctification.

How God uses them in our lives to change us into the image of Christ.

But I've started my sermon this way to remind us all that this is the issue of our day.

Every generation of Christians has to stand for specific things that sets us apart from the spirit of the age—for us it's our view and practice of marriage and fam.

This was not the issue for our grandparents and great grandparents—it is for us.

Not all of you are married with children. Some of you aren't married.

Some of you are married, but don't have children.

Some of you were married, but are not now because of divorce or death.

But we're all in this together because we're part of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

And in his kingdom, marriage and family matter.

As a body of believers bound together in this church,

we are for marriage and family and should make every effort to protect them.

It's on this issue that the church will stand or fall in our day.

Now, more specifically to Paul's teaching.

He's just finished his teaching on how Christians change.

And his last point, the last component of change, is that you have a new self.

The new man in Christ—and you are to put on that new self—

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

From that he moves right into these verses on the family life.

His point is that your role, with your spouse and with your children, is to be

an advocate for that new self and to invest in what Christ is making them to be.

One day there is going to be a sinless version of your spouse—

with all his or her capacities fulfilled, perfect morally, but with his or her distinct personality in the image of God.

And it's the same with your children. God is making them into his children.

He has a destiny planned for them when they are free from sin, and fulfill all their potential in Christ's eternal kingdom.

He's making them into that person now, even if it's hard to see at time.

And your calling, as a spouse, or as a parent, and even as a child,

is to invest in those new persons that God is making the members of your family.

In the family you are Jesus' agent as he changes husbands and wives, parents and children into his image.

But husbands don't enter into that agency in the same way wives do.

And parents and children also have different roles to play.

There are unique ways we are to approach this task based on gender and life stage.

So everybody doesn't get the same instruction.

Paul tells wives one thing, husbands another, children and parents another.

I'm going to limit my comments to verses 18 and 19, verses about wives, husbands.

In a later sermon we'll look more closely at 20 and 21, children and parents.

Let's look at this under three headings:

1. The wife's role
2. The husband's role
3. Some practical matters of church life

Credit where credit is due: Robert Rayburn, Chaz. Garland—for sermons.

MP#1 The wife's role

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

There's that word submit, which is soundly mocked by contemporary society.

And this is why: The world only understand authority and submission in terms of superiority and inferiority.

So when it hears "wives submit," it hears "women are inferior, men superior."

And, to be honest, there have been Christians and churches that have taught that.

But the true theological basis for submission is the doctrine of the Trinity.

In the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are equal in power and glory. All three persons of Godhead equally God.

None is inferior to the other. No fundamental hierarchy in the Trinity.

And yet, when it comes to God's actions, to the work he does,

there is a relationship of authority. The Son submits to the Father, does his will.

The Holy Spirit does the will of the Father and the Son.

Complete equals, who have an authority relationship.

Son's role in submitting to Father is to bring him glory,

and the Father works all things for the glory of his Son.

So the wife enters marriage as God the Son submits to God the Father—

and that means that she is not diminished in any way.

So what does submission look like?

When a woman marries a man and lives with him as his wife,

she very soon knows his flaws better than anyone else.

She knows areas where he is irresponsible.

She knows his sinful failures. She knows the fragility of his ego.

But the big question is: What will she then do with that information?

Will she use it as ammo against him?

As leverage to get him to do what she wants or as a punishment when frustrated?

Will she store it up as a bitter seed of resentment in her heart?

Or, will she take that information—true as it may be—and say to herself,

Jesus is making this man into a new person, a new man.

One day my husband is going to be a powerful man, with all of his strengths magnified and perfected, and all of his weaknesses eradicated.

And as his wife, I'm going to be an advocate for that new person he's becoming.

I'm going to see him as Jesus sees him.

That means I see him clearly as he is now, a man full of flaws and sins—

because Jesus sees those bad things in him too.

But I'm also going to try to see him as Jesus is making him to be.

And I'm going to promote that new man, and invest in the future self my husband is becoming in Christ.

Now, here where the rubber meets the road:

The most leverage you have as a wife to promote the new man your husband is becoming is by your encouragement and deference.

That's the heart of submission—encouragement and deference.

If you use scolding and criticism, guilt manipulation, if you regularly point out his flaws, you're not going to influence your husband—at least not in the direction you want him to move—you'll drive him away.

But if you use encouragement and deference you will become a powerful agent for good in his life.

Now there are certainly times when a wife ought to challenge her husband.

What you are doing is wrong, you have to change. As sister in Christ telling you. But there aren't many bullets in that gun.

Those times have to be very, very rare if going to be effective.

And you have to pave the way with plenty of supporting compliments.

Main way you are Jesus' agent in husband's life is encouragement and deference.

Now, that's not all submission is.

There are times in a marriage when a decision has to be made and you've looked at it as best you can and prayed about it and you still disagree.

So there is a tie-breaker function in submission—that's the husband's role.

And wives, when that happens, you are to be just as encouraging and deferential.

But listen husbands, if you are often pulling rank and using the tiebreaker—

if that's a common part of your life together, then you have marriage problems.

Because the vast majority of the time, hopefully all the time, the two of you are rowing in the same direction.

So that's it in a nutshell.

A wife's submission to her husband in the Lord is a conscious, attitudinal and behavioral endorsement and support of the new man your husband is becoming.

What do you think about when you think about him?

What do you say to your children about him?

What do you say about him when you're having a drink with your girl friends?

Submission means you are his advocate.

You're not deluded or blind about his flaws, but you are determined to be Jesus' agent of change in his life—and the way is deference and encouragement.

MP#2 The husband's role

Husbands, you are also to be an advocate for the new person your wife is becoming.

Fully invested in being an agent of Jesus Christ in her life.

Paul says the main way you do that is:

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

See, men have to be told to be loving because we aren't naturally loving.

And we have to be told not to be harsh, because that's how we tend to be.

When a man marries a woman and lives with her, he sees her in every situation.

He's sees her when she's ugly. He's sees her when she's upset and crying.

He's seen her when she's foolish and embarrassing.

The question is:

What are you going to do with your wife's weaknesses?

Well, one thing you could do is be harsh to her, belittle her.

Comment on her dumb decisions or how erratic she is.

You could disparage her in front of the children—You know your mother!

When you are with other couples, you could interrupt because what she's about to say isn't very smart and it embarrasses you in some way.

So you try to clean up socially after her because she's not that great.

You've been around couples like that.

Paul says: That's not how it's supposed to be in Christ's kingdom.

You've been shown mercy—show mercy toward your wife.

Love her. How should you primarily love her? Talk to her.

A husband's speech has extraordinary power over the heart of his wife and the character of their marriage.

Nothing shapes the character of a marriage more than the speech of husband.

This is the way God intended it to be from the beginning.

God created Adam first and then he made the woman from Adam's rib.

When he brought her to Adam do you remember what Adam did after he praised her? He named her. He named her Eve.

This naming was not just a minor detail.

To name something is to express authority.

Because of that divinely established order in marriage—

the husband's speech is particularly powerful.

Wives are affected much more deeply by the words of their husbands than husbands are affected by the words of their wives.

That may seem unfair, but that's the way God has made us.
Even the secular world, for all its official stance of feminism, knows this.

Pick up any magazine in the grocery store with cover stories like:

“What women wish they could change about their husbands.”

Guarantee that the number one item will be something about his speech.

I wish he would communicate better.

I wish he would tell his feelings.

I wish he would bring me into his world.

I wish he would ask my advice.

I wish he would compliment me.

I wish he would take more initiative in our relationship

Husbands, love your wives by opening your mouth.

That's how you become an advocate for the new person she is growing into.

That's how you become an agent of Jesus in her life.

Rather than becoming less confident for being married to you,

she should become more confident, more independent.

She should be able to stride through life because she's loved by a man
who is invested in her future.

She should not be afraid to answer for the two of you and not afraid to assert her
opinions because she knows her husband values her wisdom and treats her gently.

You invest in her life the way Jesus invested in your life.

He sees all your weakness, but he's the advocate for who you are becoming.

And the way this plays out in marriage, the place the rubber meets the road,
is that your authority and leadership is a place for you to serve.

You come home from work and it's been a tough day and you say:

Bring me a drink woman. Bring me the TV guide. I'm the big dog here.

Jesus says: Not in my kingdom. That's the world's kingdom.

You're the little dog here. I've saved you and made you a husband to serve.

So your needs are second, or third, or tenth.

If you have as many kids as some of you have, you can forget about
your needs for a long time. That's your authority as husband—authority to serve.

Marriage is an arena for change in the Christian life, it's an arena for sanctification.

Wives and husbands are called to be advocates and supporters of that change
in the other—not in the way you would naturally do it—by nagging and scolding,
or by being harsh or distant, but as God demands—submission and love.

MP#3 Some practical matters of church life

In thinking about these verses and our life together as a body,
there are some practical matters we need to keep in mind.
There probably lots of other things that need to be said, but here are a few.

The first is, be careful who you marry.

Of course, you have to marry a believer.
To choose marriage to an unbeliever is an act of high-handed rebellion.
It's choosing a marriage that is the very opposite of what we've just studied.
The Lord gives sober warnings to believers who deliberately,
against the pleadings of Christian friends and family, marry outside the faith.
His warning is this: Your marriage will degrade and weaken your faith
and will likely break the covenant line with your children.
I trust all of you who hope to get married know these things.

But just because a prospective spouse is a professing Christian
doesn't mean you throw all caution to the wind. Be careful. Be wise.
Girls, if you marry a passive man, your life is going to be hard.
If you marry a bully, your life is also going to be hard.
You'll find yourself sitting in church, listening to sermons like this,
and saying to yourself: I know the Bible says submit.
But why would God tell me to do this? It's too hard.
It's hard to respect someone who's not respectable.
And boys, if you marry a bossy girl, or a spoiled girl, it's going to be hard.
It's hard to lovingly lead someone who doesn't want to be led, period.

Look at the parents of your prospective spouse.
If you see a woman flourishing and confident because of her relationship
with her husband, that's a good sign.
If you see a man who puts his needs and demands in second place,
and serves his wife and family—that's a good sign too.
I know folks are blind when it comes to romance, but listen to the people
who love you, whether it is your parents or Christian friends.

The second practical matter is closely related, help each other.

Women help women. Men help men.
If our marriages and families are going to be places where we are advocates
for Christ and where we are fully invested in the new people our loved ones
are becoming, we need help.

How are you going to learn not to talk bad about your husband if other women in the church encourage it?

If you aren't being his advocate, is there somebody in your life close enough and spiritually sensitive enough to say—Don't talk about your husband like that. Or to tell you that you have to stop using his failures as blackmail against him. And are you loving enough and brave enough to say those things, and challenge your sister when she needs to hear it?

If there are passive husbands in the church, how are they going to change? Their wives can nag them but that's not going to do any good.

That's a recipe for despair in a marriage.

There need to be men in the church who are close enough to each other to say—Step up to the plate, lead your family, love and serve your wife.

And even if you don't say that, you should set such a good example as servant leader that other men will be embarrassed, and hope their wives don't see how happy and flourishing your wife is.

And in the church there need to be men who as fathers and brothers in Christ, will defend a wife against a bully husband by rebuking him and taking to task. If there is an abusive husband, men in the church need to draw hard lines with the man that his wife is too afraid or confused to draw.

That leads to a third related practical matter.

Don't let anyone use this passage to justify abuse.

Men have used it that way and women have taken it, because they've been convinced that's what it means to be a submissive wife.

Go back and read Colossians up to this point, especially chapter three, and tell me if it's ok to hit a woman who is weaker than you?

Or to verbally berate someone who is weaker, or to denigrate her or call names? In the church we can't ever let a man hide behind this.

This is going to sound scary,

but if you are a woman in an abusive marriage, you need to pipe up.

There are men in this body who will stand with you and protect you as your fathers and brothers in Christ.

Every one of your elders are here for you, but you have to speak up.

And as a man, don't you dare do this to your wife.

Don't try to hide behind biblical authority and submission—you have no cover.

You provoke the anger of God, who is a defender of the weak.

Jesus is making us new. He's changing us.
You're not stuck. You might feel like it, but you aren't.
The past does not define you.

We're going to be the people he is making us to be.
He's given us the new self and we're putting on the new self.
And he's given us marriage and family as one arena
in which his grace and sanctification is working out in our lives.

Let's make the most of it.
Let's defend it as a church so that Christ is honored.