

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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Ruled by Christ and Serving One Another

Colossians 3:12-4:1 (NIV)

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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

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

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

4.1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

[Slide 1] Opening

Good morning church! We're resuming our series in Colossians this morning after our break for Independence Day: "Good To Be Together." I know that having these interruptions in the series makes it more difficult to follow the train of thought in what Paul is saying to us. So I appreciate your patience. And we're nearing the end of the letter: after today's sermon, there are two more messages that will take us to the end of July and finish the series.

[Slide 2] *Review*

But let's take a quick review on the main points in Paul's letter so far.

Let's recall that Paul is writing this letter to a young church in Colossae, a church Paul has never visited which was started by one of his disciples, Epaphras. Paul prays earnestly for them to mature spiritually, to grow up into the fullness of Christ. He has reminded them of the greatness of Christ, the one through whom God created all that is and reconciled us to himself through the cross, and the Head of the Church and Supreme Lord of the universe, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.

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Paul has also had to warn these believers about the dangers of some false teachers who had infiltrated the church and were endangering the church's stability in the faith and threatening to short-circuit their spiritual growth. Instead of following their convoluted and strange notions, the Colossian church needed to hold fast to Jesus Christ. Paul reminds them that they had died to their old lives and had been raised to a new life in Christ, which was symbolized for them in water baptism. Now they needed to be focused on this new life which could only be found by following the example and the teaching of Christ.

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That new life is rooted in Christ, through trusting in the love that God has for us which he demonstrated to us in sending his son to die on the cross for us. And our new life is demonstrated when we live with our minds set on the things above, the things that correspond to the ways of the kingdom of God rather than living according to our old sinful habits and desires. It is also demonstrated when we allow God to knit our hearts together with the rest of the body of Christ so that we love one another genuinely and deeply, from the heart.

[Slide 5] *Introduction: The household code*

Before we dig into this section of Paul's letter more deeply, there are two important bits of background information that will help us understand what Paul is saying—and therefore better understand what God is saying to us today.

First, the latter half of the passage we read today (the part addressing wives, husbands, children, slaves, and masters) fits the form of a very commonly used literary category in the Greco-Roman world known as the "household code." It was a typical way to pass on moral or ethical instructions, to admonish someone about traditional values, or to summarize the normal domestic duties for the household, which in the ancient world, included not only the members of the

nuclear family, but extended family, hired servants, slaves, and even business associates who might live with the family.

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Since this form of exhortation was common and well-known, Paul uses it here and elsewhere in his letters (as does Peter in his first letter). But instead of simply passing on traditional notions of what is expected, Paul fills this familiar form with Christian content. He uses the category of the household code to show how the gospel message and the apostolic teaching are to be lived out in the ordinary world of home and family. In the apostles' letters, the household code is not simply a standard list of expected behaviors or a catalogue of cultural virtues. It is a reminder and an exhortation of how to live as a result of being born again and being indwelt by the Spirit of God. Because the fullness of God is in the person of Jesus Christ, who lives in us by the Holy Spirit, the life and goodness of God is displayed in the way we live in relation to God and to one another.

[Slide 7] *Introduction: The literary context*

That brings us to the all-important second point of background information: the literary context of these instructions. The exhortations to wives, husbands, children, slaves, and masters are not a pre-fabricated, independent moral code or a standardized list of expected moral behaviors. They are not a new law. The exhortations are given in the context of the instructions for the church in their corporate life and worship together. They are intended to help the people of God make the connection between worship and home life, between religious piety and morality, between spiritual devotion and practical day-to-day living.

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That means that we must read these exhortations with all of what has come before in the letter in our minds, paying particular attention to the immediately preceding paragraphs.

Paul has already emphasized that Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of the universe and the Head of the church. So he is the one who rules over the church; he is the king of the kingdom of God. Therefore, if we are followers of Christ, Paul says, we are to be ruled by Christ. Our allegiance is first and always to him above every other power in this world (including, most especially, our own desire to rule over ourselves). To be ruled by Christ is one of the defining marks of being a Christian.

[Slide 9] *Ruled by Christ*

What does it look like to be ruled by Christ? Paul has given us some key indications in the first half of the passage we read today.

First, in verse 16, Paul reminds us that we are to let the word of Christ (NIV, “*the message of Christ*”) dwell richly among us. This expression, “*the word of Christ*,” would include several things. It would certainly include Jesus’ own teaching—the *word which belongs to Christ*, that which he delivered to the apostles. It would also include the gospel message—the *word that tells us about Christ*, the gospel and the apostolic teaching that explains and applies what Jesus taught. And since part of the message of the gospel included the testimony about Christ from the Old Testament, the “*word of Christ*” would also include the *word of God that testifies about Christ*, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, which Jews already confessed was the word of God.

The word of Christ must govern us, if we claim to be a follower of Jesus. To be ruled by Christ means that his teaching governs my life and my ways. It is the primary vehicle by which God shapes us as he works to conform us to the image of Christ.

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Second, in verse 15, Paul specifically exhorts us to “*let the peace of Christ rule*” among us (“*in your hearts*”). The “*peace of Christ*” is the peace that comes from Christ, the peace that is a result of being reconciled to God through Jesus’ death on the cross. Since we are no longer at war with God, no longer ruled by our own selfish desires and alienated from the life of God, but have been reconciled to God, we enjoy a peace that passes all understanding.

And by that same act, the death of Christ on the cross, God has brought us together in a new body, the church, having reconciled us to one another. Instead of remaining hostile toward those who are unlike me, who are from a different ethnic background, or a different socio-economic group, or a different nationality, we can live peaceably with one another, because we have been united in Christ. In him, my former enemies have become my family.

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But that spiritual reconciliation with others takes ongoing maintenance. Being ruled by the peace of Christ means that we must actively pursue peace and unity within the body of Christ, not just as a slogan we salute, but as the reality that we live out. So we have to be quick to forgive, slow to take offense, eager to restore broken relationships, and always ready to show mercy to one another.

It also means that I cannot read the following instructions about life in the household in such a way that they become something that introduces conflict and division in the home or the church, or that reinforces a pattern of hostility and domination over others instead of promoting healthy relationships among equals.

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Third, in verse 14, Paul reminds us that the supremely essential quality of the life of the church must be that of love for one another. Love, he says, is the “*perfect bond of unity*.” It is the highest virtue—the choice to seek for the greatest good of someone, even if that requires a sacrificial cost on my part. Jesus himself gave his disciples his new commandment to “*love one another*.” He told them that love for one another would mark them as his disciples. It was to be our most obvious characteristic, the testimony to the world that we belonged to Jesus.

To be ruled by Christ, therefore, requires that we are committed to the difficult, and often costly, choice to be united with these other people who are also following Christ, who are very different, with different backgrounds, perspectives, ideas, habits, and ways of approaching things. It means that Jayhawks have to learn to love—not just tolerate—Wildcats and Tigers; and vice-versa. It means that farmers have to love—not disdain—city dwellers; that business people have to love folks on the Hill; that conservatives have to love progressives, and progressives love conservatives. It means that whites have to love blacks and Hispanics and Asians and Native Americans—that all of us from wherever we’ve come have to meet together at the foot of the cross and join hands and commit to one another.

[Slide 13] *Two keys to the passage*

Twice in this passage, Paul uses this phrase, “*whatever you do*” It is an important signal; it is Paul’s way of saying, “*Pay special attention to this point! Whatever else you may think is important, make sure that you are doing this!*” These two points are key for understanding the entire passage, especially the household code with its exhortations for how to live as Christians in the home.

Let’s look at them both in turn.

[Slide 14] *Whatever you do #1*

In verse 17, Paul says, “*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*.” Whatever you do, whether that is something that you say or an action you take—that’s pretty comprehensive, wouldn’t you say? That’s one of the ways we know that Paul is signaling the importance of what follows. This is a comprehensive statement, something that is meant to govern everything else in our lives as believers.

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“*Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*.” Well, what does that mean, really?

Let’s start by seeing what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that tacking the words “*in the name of Jesus*” to all of my actions somehow makes whatever I do

or say okay in God's eyes. It's not a way to avoid having to think or make wise choices by simply saying "*Jesus*" whenever I want to do what I want to do.

No, the expression, "*in the name of Jesus,*" is a kind of a code. It means, "*as someone who has identified with Jesus by becoming his follower, his disciple.*" When we gather "*in Jesus' name,*" we are gathering as those who are Jesus' disciples. When we pray "*in Jesus' name,*" we are not announcing that we have come to the end of the prayer (and now we can eat, or leave, or begin the meeting). We are saying that we are praying to God as those who have been reconciled to him through Christ. We are praying to God the Father because we are disciples of his Son, who taught us to call God our *Abba*, our Father.

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Whatever you do, do it as a disciple of Jesus. Let everything that you do and say reflect the fact that you have abandoned your old life in order to take up the new life of following Jesus. Instead of living according to your own desires, instead of ruling your own life, you have surrendered your life to Jesus. You are now ruled by him, by his word, letting his teaching govern you, letting the peace that you have as a result of being reconciled to God through the cross be the determining factor in how you live, so that you come together with God's people and find the good in that as you learn more and more how to love them and others.

Your life is now hidden with Christ in God—it is no longer something that you have laid out for yourself, or that others have forced you into doing. Your life is found in living for Jesus; it is aimed at fulfilling the will and purpose of God, of displaying the goodness of God. Your mind is set on the things above, so that your focus, your desires are all directed toward him, even as you go about all of the regular stuff of daily life. You are living as a disciple of Jesus, and everything you do or say ought to reflect that truth. *Whatever you do, do it as a disciple of Jesus.*

[Slide 17] *Whatever you do* #2

Then in verses 23-24, Paul says, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*" This comes in the part where Paul directly addresses those who were slaves. There were probably more than a few in the Colossian church who found themselves in this situation. One of the things we know about the population of the Roman Empire in the first century is that a significant percentage of the people were slaves. In Rome itself and the region right around the city, those who were enslaved represented between 25-50% of the population. In the provinces, such as where Colossae was located, it was closer to ten percent—but still a substantial

figure. And from early church writings we know that many in the church were slaves.

But the fact that Paul echoes his earlier language here indicates that he is not simply addressing those who were formally enslaved. The earlier “*whatever you do*” included the entire body of believers. Paul’s echo of that phrase here indicates that he still has in mind the entire church as he makes his general point.

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That point is this: Whatever you do—that is, whatever your particular role is, whether you are a wife or a husband, a parent or a child, a slave or a master—do everything that you do as if you were serving Jesus himself. As if you were directly doing it to him. Because Jesus lives in each of his disciples, whatever you do to them, you do to him. When you serve them, you are serving him. And since he is your master, your Lord, you are obligated to him, to spend your life in his service. And his commandment is that we are to follow him, the one who gave his life in service to us, so that we might become servants to one another, and to the world.

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If I take these two points as fundamental to rightly understand what Paul is saying (and therefore what God is saying to us today), then I read these exhortations through a different lens, with a slightly different filter. Instead of seeing the command for wives to submit to their husbands as a divine declaration of the supremacy of males over females and a commendation of patriarchy as the necessary and God-ordained structure for society, I see that command as a pastoral exhortation, given to women in a time when they had very few, if any, other options. Similarly, the commands concerning slaves do not represent the divine affirmation of the validity of slavery or an endorsement of the notion that some people are “naturally” fit to be slaves—a view that was held by many at the time and indeed, throughout history, and not just American history, but the history of people on this planet. Instead Paul’s words represent the voice of a pastor helping people who had little if any recourse available to them that might allow them to change their situation know how to live faithfully as a follower of Christ.

Let me explain a little more what I mean by this.

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Some people read Paul’s language in this passage and conclude that Paul endorsed and approved of both slavery and the subjection of women under male domination. But I am convinced that this is a completely wrong reading of the text.

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Consider first the historical situation at the time Paul wrote this letter. In both cases (that of women and that of slaves), we are talking about systemic cultural realities which had been the case for over two millennia. There are some things and some times where change requires a radical reform. But changing deeply entrenched ways of thinking that are characteristic of an entire society, particularly something that has been the case for two thousand years is neither a simple nor an easy task; nor is the path that leads to change one that is straight with the steps clearly laid out. Even radical reforms generally are introduced by smaller, less perceptible steps; change is easier in smaller, more digestible bites.

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Consider, for example, Jesus' act of allowing women to follow him as disciples, something that those of us who are watching "The Chosen" are seeing acted out for us. At the time, this was a bold and radical change, one that was risky and brought Jesus a lot of controversy and accusation. Yet he was insistent that women be given equal access to his teaching—despite the fact that they were not allowed to study the Scriptures elsewhere in the culture. Jesus was making a radical statement about the fundamental equality of men and women by allowing women to join him as his disciples.

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Nevertheless, Jesus did not name a woman as one of the twelve apostles. They were all male. Clearly, Jesus was not afraid of confronting or breaking cultural norms. He did not restrict the Twelve to men because he thought women were completely unsuited for leadership. But in the first century, Jewish women would not have been capable of leading in the roles the apostles would need to take, nor would they have been listened to in the wider culture. Jesus took a smaller step that was intended to lead to greater steps over time. He began a process of raising the standing of women within his followers, which led to raising their standing in the wider culture. As more women became disciples, as they learned Jesus' teaching, as they experienced the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and as they matured in their understanding of the Scriptures and of the ways of God, they began to develop abilities and skills beyond that of domestic life in the home. With access to learning that had been forbidden them, they would become ready and able to take on the tasks and roles of leadership within the church, and eventually, within the society at large. (It's not really God's fault that it took as long as it did to reach this point.)

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The situation is similar when we think about slavery in the first century. Consider, for instance, Paul's statement in Colossians 3:11, the closing verse in the paragraph right before where we started today. "*Here (that is, in the church) there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*" Paul calls the church to recognize that as those who are followers of Christ, they meet together in the church on a different basis than that of the wider society. Here, in church, the distinctions that are used to classify people and set them in positions and give or take away status—all of those distinctions are eliminated. In the one body of the church, all are brothers and sisters: we stand on the same level, with the same status—forgiven sinners, beloved children, fellow servants.

So when slaves and masters met for communion, eating from the same table—something that was both radical and shocking to everyone!—the church was following in Jesus' footsteps. They took this small but cataclysmic step which planted the seeds of a process that would eventually lead to the end of legalized slavery within the Roman Empire.

Meanwhile, Paul's pastoral approach enabled those who were caught in the situation of being a slave—with very little they could do to escape from their enslavement—to live with a hope that went beyond this world, beyond their situation. United to Christ in the church, they could know a freedom that allowed them to serve in a totally different way and toward a different purpose.

[Slide 25] *Colossians and Philemon*

There is something else that we must consider as well. Paul's letter to the Colossians was not the only letter that was carried to them by Paul's assistant, a man named Tychicus. Along with the letter to the church, Paul sent a second letter to a member of the church there, a man named Philemon. And with the letter, Paul also sent along a young man, Onesimus. Onesimus was Philemon's slave, who had apparently stolen from his master and run away, only to end up with Paul, for whom he proved to be quite helpful.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul urges him to welcome Onesimus back as a beloved brother—not as a runaway slave who has wronged him, for whom the legal penalty was death. Paul goes even further, strongly hinting that Philemon should do the right thing and set Onesimus free. But the way Paul treats the whole situation shouts of his pastoral approach. He tells Philemon that he is not going to order him to free Onesimus—though he has the authority to do so! Instead, he wants Philemon to free him on his own, by his own free choice.

So to the Colossian church, Paul publicly addresses those who are slaves, who cannot change their situation, and tells them how they can live as faithful followers of Christ, who will certainly reward them in the next life. And at the same time, he addresses Philemon privately, urging him to give up his legal right to punish his slave in order to gain a brother and benefit the kingdom of God by granting him his freedom.

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What this shows us is that all along, Paul has been appealing to a deeper, more fundamental and more powerful foundation than could be built with a list of morally acceptable behaviors for the members of the household or the church. He is operating from an entirely different paradigm for life, a different model for how to live and function in this world. It's a model that goes far beyond mere cultural mores and traditional roles in family and society. It is a model that is based on the new life we have in Christ, a life that is found by identifying with him rather than with the ideals—however noble—of the culture around us. It is a new life that is measured not by conformity to traditions but by conformity to Jesus Christ. It is a life that is ruled by him, where the goal is to conform to his image, where the goodness of God is displayed in our love for one another. It is a life that demonstrates our allegiance to Christ through our service rendered to others, especially to those of the body of Christ.

Ruled by Christ, serving one another—this is what it means to live as disciples of Christ, as followers of Jesus, as citizens of the kingdom of God, as the church. It is good to be together.

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Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]