



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Teaching for Families in a Hostile Culture

Colossians 3.18 – 4.1

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Introduction

William Barclay once wrote, “There is no time in history when the marriage bond stood in greater peril of almost total destruction than in the days when Christianity first came into the world.”¹

Barclay wrote that in the late 1950s; I wonder whether he would say it the same way now. Whatever the state of marriage “in the days when Christianity first came into the world,” it’s easy to think the peril might be greater today.

In light of Barclay’s observation, and in preparation for our study, I make three observations.

1. In terms of quantity, New Testament writers do not devote much space to dealing directly with the home; I once counted fewer than ten texts, total, counting parallel passages separately.²
2. But what they say is significant, especially since they were written in a world where many (though not all) treated the matter so cavalierly.
3. Their teaching about the home was grounded theologically and Christologically, i.e., in great principles and in light of the people involved being subjects of Jesus the Lord. The “three easy steps to” approach some seek today is absent from New Testament treatments.

We should keep these ideas in mind as we consider Paul’s teaching in Colossians 3.18 – 4.1.

Their Times

God’s servants in the first century faced considerable challenges to God’s ideals regarding the family. Think first of Matthew 19.3, 10, where some Pharisees asked about the least that was required to get out of marriage and the disciples were amazed at the standard Jesus declared. Take note of historical records that report the casual approach to wedding vows by many men and women, and the broad acceptance of sexual relations outside of marriage (both hetero- and homosexual). Bear in mind, also, how in cities such as Corinth and Ephesus, the surrounding

cultures made the red-light districts of Amsterdam or the activities in Las Vegas or San Francisco seem tame by comparison.

But also, be aware that there were many in the ancient world who held to higher standards.³ From at least the time of Aristotle onward, there were those who advocated good order in the home because the household was the basic unit of the state. Seneca (ca. 4 BC – 65 AD), for example, described “one department of philosophy as concerned to ‘advise how a husband should conduct himself toward his wife, or how a father should bring up his children, or how a master should rule his slaves’” (Dunn, 243). And diaspora Jews expressed similar concerns.

In fact, it is legitimate to “speak of common preoccupations among ethical and political thinkers which naturally included a focus on the theme of the good ordering of the household and its constituent parts” (Dunn, 243-244). New Testament writers made good use of these wider concerns.

Paul’s Approach

Just as he did on a different subject in Athens (beginning with and declaring the God they did not know), Paul and others (e.g., 1 Pet 2.18 – 3.7) emphasized the importance of good order in the home, echoing the loftier ideals found in Greek and Jewish writings from the period. Becoming part of the new community of Jesus did not mean household responsibilities should be neglected; good was good regardless of who did it. In fact, Christian appeals resembled those from wider culture “to live fully in accord with high social ideals, widely esteemed as such by other ethicists of the time. The perspective and enabling might be different but the goals were shared” (Dunn, 245).

What was different among the Christians, as demonstrated by Paul, was the basis for the high standards. It began with allegiance to Jesus as Lord, as evidenced by the seven uses of “Lord” (κύριος; *kyrios*) to refer to Jesus in the nine verses from Colossians 3.18 – 4.1.⁴ The disciples were called to go beyond the expectations of culture, to live in light of the understanding that their “commitment to ‘the Lord’ should affect the primary unit of community, the household” (Dunn, 244). While household codes existed in other writings, Christian adaptations of these codes differed in that their purpose was “to subject the life of Christians to the Lordship of Christ within the institutions of the secular world” (Dunn, 245.).⁵

Two principles are clear from their writings. First, Christians were called to something higher, befitting the Lord they served (Col 1.15-20) and whose traditions they followed (2.6-7). Second, because they were called to be different, they were also implicitly called to seek to transform their culture from within, not radically upset it from without. As Dunn writes,

No program for a new society was drawn up, not even one for the kingdom of God on earth. Instead Christianity recognized that it had perforce to live within an inevitably flawed and imperfect society and sought to live and witness within that society by combining that society’s proven wisdom with commitment to its own Lord and the transforming power of the love which he had embodied” (Dunn, 246).

The Beginning of Specific Instruction

Colossians 3.18 – 4.1 illustrates briefly family descriptions found generally in the wider culture and in other New Testament passages (more elaborate statements are found in Eph 5.22 – 6.9; 1 Pet 2.18 – 3.7). There are three pairs of household members with reciprocal responsibilities:

wives and husbands; children and fathers; slaves and masters. The Lord and what he expects of his people are the basis for the instruction to each of the pairs.

- Wives are to submit to husbands as is fitting to the Lord; husbands are to practice ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) and not treat their wives harshly (vv. 18-19).
- Children are to obey in everything because that is what pleases the Lord; fathers are to go beyond what was required by Roman law and not discourage their children by provoking them (vv. 20-21).
- Slaves were to obey their masters because they feared the Lord, were devoted to the Lord, and were expecting rewards from the Lord; masters, as people who were themselves accountable to their master, Christ, were to treat their slaves fairly (3.22 – 4.1).

In each case, the behaviors called for were what would have been expected for good order in the most basic unit of the state. But they also went beyond what was commonly expected, imitating and showing allegiance to Jesus.

Taken together, Paul's instructions underscore a vital, but often overlooked point: before we become too concerned with specific behaviors, we need to think more about being called to the standard of Jesus and the power to transform a world from the inside out.

Conclusion

"Fitting in the Lord," "[what] pleases the Lord," "fearing the Lord," "work heartily as for the Lord," "serving the Lord Christ" – all are phrases that describe the essence of the rightly ordered home life. When we live in our families in light of our commitment to Jesus as Lord, we will exemplify his way regardless of whether or not anyone else does so.

This is behavior that is right. It is needed. It can make a difference.

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Notes

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* Vol. I, 2nd ed., (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1958), 148.

² Counting the parallel passages in the Synoptics separately, I noted Matt 19.1-12; Mark 10; Luke 16; 1 Cor 7; 1 Pet 2.13 – 3.7; and the twin texts in Ephesians 5-6 and Colossians 3-4. There are others that touch on the matter indirectly in texts that some have identified as household codes (a group of which the Ephesians and Colossians texts are a part); e.g., 1 Tim 2.1-15; 5.1-2; 6.1-2, 17-19; and Tit 2.1 – 3.8. See P. H. Towner, "Household and Household Codes," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 417-419.

My point is not that we should not talk about families, especially in view of the fact that they have long been and remain under attack. The fact that the above passages are in the New Testament shows that God thought the matter is important for his people to study. But the approach taken is to focus mainly on one's allegiance to Jesus the Lord and the principles that implies for family life.

³ See the overview in James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 242-246.

⁴ *Kyrios* appears two other times in 3.18 – 4.1 to refer to the *masters* of slaves (3.22; 4.1).

⁵ See *Didache* 4.9-11; *Barnabas* 19.5-7; *1 Clement* 21.6-9; Ignatius, *Polycarp* 4.1 – 5.2; Polycarp, *Philippians* 4.2-3 (see further discussion in Dunn, 242).