

Sunday, November 7, 2021

Living in God-Honoring Relationships

(Message 10; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 3:18-4:1)

Scripture:

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

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

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

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

²²Slaves, 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. ²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

⁴ Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

(Colossians 3:18 - 4:1).

Message

The story is told of a theatrical company in London on a cold, winter night. Prior to their performance they noticed the house was still mostly empty and the troop was discouraged. The director, trying to find a way to encourage them, decided to tell them he had heard King George would be in the theatre that night. [He had heard nothing of the sort]. But apparently his encouragement worked because they produced their best performance to date.

They later discovered that King George had actually been in the audience. Our King is always in the audience. He always watches and knows what we do.

Last week we considered a key verse in the New Testament. We noted that **Colossians 3:17** is a great general verse with deep implications:

“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.” Following Jesus and

wholeheartedly serving him (and others) is synonymous with *the King is in the audience*. (Our King is always in the audience).

Now Paul follows that up by getting very specific about how we relate to one another in three key and common areas of life: **marriage**, parenting, and **work**. In doing so, Paul uses the phrase, "*in the Lord*" repeatedly. (So Paul repeatedly says, "*the Lord is in the audience.*")

Paul is moving ordinary relationships we often take for granted and transforming them into **spiritual** relationships; that is, our relationship with Jesus changes (must transform) all our other relationships.

These three relationships – marriage, parenting, work - impact our life; they're foundational to our well-being.

Imagine marriages where husbands and wives love and cherish each other; seek the best for each other, keep their vows faithfully, and engage each other with grace and truth.

Imagine parent-child relationships where the children respect, admire and honor their parents; and where parents are patient, loving, gracious and forgiving as they shape their children into Christ's image.

Imagine every employee working with diligence, creativity and perseverance and every employer treating every employee with respect, fairness, and deep appreciation.

That, Paul says, is Christ's vision for His Church. Followers of Christ should always do **everything in Jesus' name – conscious of the fact that Jesus is always in the audience watching.**

Before we dig in, note that these verses have been the source of much **discussion** over the centuries, especially about treatment of women and slavery; and this morning we will just begin to touch the surface.

Before we dig in, also note that just because the Bible addresses a particular issue, doesn't mean the issue is the **best reflection** of God's will. For example, in the 1800's some used this text to defend slavery: "*See, it says, slaves obey your masters so slavery must be okay.*" Wrong. The Bible never endorses slavery.

Remember most of the governments in Bible times were totalitarian – monarchies, dictatorships, etc. (not necessarily God's will for nations). In this case, the early church was in no position to outlaw slavery. So Paul's focus is, how do we live as Christ followers in a (sinful) society where slavery is a given and where a third to half of Colossae's population were slaves. Over time and with greater influence, the Church would stand against slavery and was instrumental in its undoing. William Wilberforce, a passionate follower of Jesus, was a major impetus for the anti-slavery movement that swept America.

Also note, Paul isn't calling here for the overthrow of **sinful systems**; he is offering us **guidance** on how to live as Christ's **disciples** in a sinful world.

In Paul's day, a wife was a possession of her husband, like furniture. A child was the possession of his or her parents – primarily the father; and slaves were considered the possession of their master. So while on the surface these words of Paul may appear to some as archaic and rigid; these words were actually revolutionary. Jesus set the precedence by how he treated women, children, and the poor with dignity and respect.

This can be a hard text or not depending on your perspective. The truth is, that few of us like authority and all authority is considered suspect today. Being “under” authority runs counter to our human nature that tells us to look out for Number One (and that would be me/us)!

MARRIAGE

Paul writes, “Do **everything** in the name of the Lord Jesus, and that includes your marriage. Wives, be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.”

In the first century, if you were a Jewish woman, you had no rights. In fact, an orthodox Jewish male would often pray, “Lord, thank you that I was not born a woman.” A wife could be traded, given away, divorced simply by sending her out onto the streets – usually without any means of support. A woman was not allowed, by law, to divorce her husband for any reason.

Paul goes back to the issue of **servanthood**. Paul says similar things in Titus, 1 Timothy, and Ephesians. Peter says it in 1 Peter. Followers of Jesus must be servants. So...husbands, love (i.e., serve) your wives. Never treat them harshly. Wives, be subject to (i.e., serve) your husbands. In **Ephesians 5:25f**, Paul told husbands their love for their wives ought to look like Christ's love for his Church - including his willingness to **sacrifice** and **die**. Believers serve; it is who we are; it is what we do.

Marriage *in the Lord, in Jesus' name*, is all about what I can do for my spouse; marriage outside the Lord is all about what my spouse can do for me.

When we had young children, three boys under five at one point, Marilyn and I would reconnect around supper time, we would ask, “how was your day?” and we would share our stories.

I would say something like: “*I had a breakfast meeting, a morning planning session at church, and lunch with Roger.*” Marilyn might respond something like, “*You ate in a restaurant with an adult? You didn't have to cut their food? You had a conversation with nouns and verbs?*”

Then Marilyn would say something like, *"I took the kids for a walk, and we had lunch on the picnic table."* And I might say something like, *"You and the kids had a picnic, played games and just got to hang out all day?"*

Even at our best there was a sense on some occasions where we were positioning for who has it the hardest and who needs to be served the most. (Are we the only couple that has ever done that sort of thing?)

The question is, "What might it look like if we prioritized serving each other instead of waiting to be served?"

"You've had a long tough day, I'll take care of the trash, errands, etc. You just rest and recover." When Marilyn chooses to serve me; it makes me want to serve her even more. Servanthood, when offered in love, encourages more **mutual serving**. (By contrast, self-centeredness discourages mutual serving.)

The marriage question, if you're married is, what is your servant quotient in your marriage? If you are married, what do you need to change to do your marriage *in Jesus' name*? Jesus always offered himself as a servant.

Are you constantly measuring who has done the most work (in the marriage) or are you invested in serving your spouse? For those not married, and are perhaps dating, are your relationships with others, particularly with those of the opposite sex – conducted *in Jesus' name*? Do your relationships honor Jesus? Do they follow his teachings? Are we seeking to building others up or to make ourselves look good? A Christian doesn't act out of law or obligation, but out of **love** and **grace**.

PARENTING

After a few sentences about marriage, Paul moves on to parenting:
"Children, obey your parents in everything for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter (exasperate) your children or they will become discouraged."

In Jesus' day, if you were a child, your father owned you. He could do with you what he wanted. He could put you up for adoption; he could sell you into slavery, he could toss you onto the streets. It was the law. It sounds foreign to us, but it is still happening in our world today. Paul says, "no!"

Parenting, as all parents know, is a huge challenge; it's permeated with **persistent pressures**; it starts suddenly, peaks, and subsides, but never fully goes away (Erma Bombeck once said, *"We had four children. I remember how, but I don't remember why."*)

In the midst of this pressure, it is easy to respond to our children in ways that make them lose heart, so the question here is, if you have children, "Are

you parenting *in the Lord*, in ways that don't cause your children to lose heart, or be discouraged?"

Are we **nagging** them, belittling their efforts, inappropriately teasing them, constantly **comparing** them negatively to their siblings or other children, failing to provide uniform boundaries, or failing to provide consistent discipline? What does that do to a child?

Are we preparing them to be **Christ's disciples** in the real world? Are we building large-hearted, courageous, servant-minded Christ followers? Parent in that way.

Effective parenting requires quality and quantity time. Make sure you set aside adequate time for parenting, so you won't have any regrets later – children are only young for such a short period of time.

I read recently about how eating has changed on university campuses over the last generation. When I was at school, I'd go through the line for lunch between 11:30 and 1, get all my food, sit down, and eat it at a table with friends – just like we did at home.

Today that has all changed. University dining halls have (let's call them) "grazing stations" - a salad area, a breakfast bar, an entree area, a hot grill, a deli, a desert bar – a literal food court, open all day; students can eat whenever hungry, often alone – like they did at home.

Many kids today have rarely experienced sitting down at a common table and eating a family meal together – kids today graze, eat in front of a television, computer screen or in their room, or grab something on the way to somewhere else.

For centuries, families have gathered around tables. There, they **connected**, learned to share, learned to **communicate**, learned to disagree and settle those disagreements as family around the table.

A family's values are on full display around their table. Boundaries are **established, practiced** over and over, and **passed** along to the next generation. Did you have the "one more word" rule growing up? You know, "One more word out of you and..." We would learn there is a boundary here – don't cross it.

A few years ago, a professor asked his class of 26 students: "*How many of you have your place at the table?*" Twenty did not; that's means they never ate together; they didn't have a place at the table. (If people do something at least once a week, they'll gravitate towards a place – like we do every Sunday morning ☺).

Are you devoting adequate time to your children? It is an important question and just one way of parenting in the Lord.

And, how would you treat your parents differently if you're doing it in Jesus' name?

I'm not trying to make parenting sound simplistic; it's not. I'm not trying to say that being a child is always easy; it's not. Some issues are incredibly hard to resolve; but the focus needs to be on "*servicing one another in the Lord!*" Again, Paul's focus is not on the law (he couldn't change the political law of his day), but on love, on servanthood, and on being more and more **Christ-like**.

WORK

Paul continues to address the relationship between slaves and masters (in those days, master-slave was the most common work relationship; there were no large corporations, no labor unions, etc.).

In Paul's day, if you were a slave, your life was regulated by the law. Your owner could sell you, torture you, even kill you – do whatever he wanted because he owned you. It was the law. Between thirty and fifty percent of the population in Colossae were slaves. When Paul's letter was read in Colossae, both the slaves and wealthy owners would have been taken aback.

The conversation might look quite different today; but the **principles** are **similar**. And the question in this section is, "*What does it mean to work in Jesus' name?*" To answer, let's think about four (more) questions: What is work (biblically)? How should I work? Who am I working for? And why should I work?

First, what does the Bible mean when it talks about work? Paul writes, "Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human beings." (3:23) (Paul is again being comprehensive).

Some people define work as, "*the creation of value.*" When you cook, construct a road, offer a service, you enhance people's lives. People are blessed. And note, this definition doesn't say anything about a paycheck.

So, a parent who stays home full-time to care for children is working! Our society has really got this messed up. (Tony Campolo's wife Peggy stayed home with their kids and found the question, "What do you do?" kind of irritating. So when asked, she would respond, "*I'm socializing two homo sapiens in the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition so they can become agents for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God had in mind from the beginning of time.*" Then she'd ask, "What do you do?"

So work is what you do: corporate leadership, assembly line, students at school, retirees volunteering. Our work affects **everyone** and **everything**.

Second question. How should I work?

Paul writes, “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly fearing the Lord*” (3:22).

How should I work? Not just some of the time, but **whole-heartedly**, putting my whole self into it. Work so it becomes an expression, a reflection, of who you are in the Lord.

The key is not the task; the key is how you are doing it – are you serving?

There is a noticeable difference between Burger King and Chick-fil-a. While they both provide food, the staff at Chick-fil-a is much better trained in wholehearted service. They are relentless about friendly service.

Work and service go back to Creation to God’s work; God expressed **his character** when he created the heavens and the earth, animals, and human beings. Then he put human beings in a garden to work and till the soil.

So work is how we reflect the image of God; it is fundamental to our identity. We will continue “working” in heaven (check out **Isaiah 60:5**); but in heaven, we will not labor in vain.

So, what kind of attitude do we work with? We are called to be the kind of employee Jesus would be; the kind of employee Jesus would hire. We are called to be the kind of employer Jesus would be; the kind of employer Jesus would serve.

Many workplaces are toxic. Do I contribute to that by being a worker filled with negativity and complaint, just punching the clock, just going through the motions, offering minimum investment? (or)

Am I working *in the Lord* with a spirit of **gratitude** and enthusiasm; diligently and wholeheartedly, **partnering** with God in caring for his creation?

Third Question. Whom do you work for? (People often get confused)

Paul says, “*Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human beings...it is the Lord Jesus Christ you are serving*” (3:23).

Most of us have a boss. Many people don’t really like their boss – sometimes because of who the boss is or treats them, but sometimes, just because they don’t like bosses. But no human institution can function without someone(s) in authority. Shakespeare once said, “*If two people ride a horse, someone has to ride up front.*”

Paul provides us with a fundamental, theological principle here. If you are a follower of Jesus, **you serve Jesus!** So, if Jesus were your direct **supervisor**, would you work differently? Then work differently.

How would you answer the phone, type a document, teach a class, write ad copy if you knew Jesus was going to check your work? Do you expense personal items? Do personal work on company time? This is the nitty-gritty stuff of working *“for the Lord.”*

Whether we love our boss or have a difficult boss, we work for the Lord. Even if we own the company, we have a boss – we work for the Lord.

This leads to questions like, “Am I working with integrity?” “Am I working for others or just for me?” “Am I trying to get back at the company or my supervisor by working less and saying I’m working more?” Jesus knows our work habits – all of them, he’s in the audience.

Final Question. What do I work for?

Almost unanimously the average person on the street will answer that question: “for **money.**” Have you seen the bumper sticker, “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go?” That’s true for many people.

If our focus of work is on the money, we’ll soon begin to resent work as people often do. (There was a country western song years ago entitled, *Take this Job and Shove it.* The singer? Johnny Paycheck).

Paul tells the Church at Colossae, “*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*” (3:23-24).

By Roman law, slaves were prevented from inheriting anything, If a slave obtained any possessions, they were not allowed to pass them to their children. An inheritance was reserved only for the wealthy, the free and the powerful.

So this promise Paul makes about an inheritance is amazing. There is a big-time inheritance awaiting you – bigger and better than Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Jeff Bezos’ kids will get. Read this week that Shaq’s kids bug him about buying things they want, saying, “We’re rich...” Shaq’s response is, “*We’re not rich; I’m rich.*” Our God is rich, but he shares his riches with us.

In our world, the reward for labor is seldom fair. (People who toss a football around make millions while our paramedics get minimum wage.) Many of us know this experientially. In 3:25; Paul notes wrongdoers will be repaid; justice will occur; the inheritance is coming.

Since we work for the **Lord**, one day God will right the wrongs; he will reward faithful servants, “*Well, done!*” and there will be a rich **inheritance** for us. Be faithful now; be **rewarded** later.

It is about humility, wholeheartedness, servanthood. Simply, it is about being Christlike in all our relationships. A disciple longs, strives, to be like their

rabbi. Paul underscores that. In these verses, Paul is saying, *“Live in Jesus’ name. Get real practical and **concrete** about it. When you love your spouse in the Lord, honor your parents, and raise your children in the Lord, work in your job, home, and community in the Lord, you will be blessed forever, and the kingdom of God will be advanced.”*

Gospel singer, Johnny Ray Watson, told the story of a seventeen-year-old girl in a beauty pageant. For the talent portion, she decided to sing a gospel song that talked about her Jesus. One of the judges warned her, *“Young lady, I wouldn’t sing that.”* When she asked why, he said, *“Because if you sing that song, you won’t win.”* She replied, *“Maybe in your eyes I won’t, but I’m still going to sing it.”* And she did. Her King was in audience.

She understood. If our eyes are solely on this **time**, we don’t really **understand** God’s will for our life. If our eyes are on **eternity**, we know that when we get **home** there will be a victory celebration. A seventeen-year-old girl understood that, so must we.

Let's stand for prayer.