

Colossians 4

The Order of God

Christians belong to heaven. We are to set our minds (meditate) on heaven. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. Therefore, we do not live out of our circumstances, we live out of heaven. The life that we have in Christ is not given by the world: the world did not give it and the world cannot take it away. We may not have the outcomes that we desire in this world but we do have the outcomes we desire in heaven. There is an inheritance laid up for us in heaven (1Pet 1:4). In fact, it is the heavenly outcomes that we should be desiring, for these are eternal (2Cor 5:1). Given our heavenly goal, we should put to death our members that are of the earth (3:5). These earthly members (fornication, passion, idolatry, covetousness) are incredible distractions for the heavenly life on earth. This division between heaven and earth is also reflected in the advice of James 3:13-18. Here James compares the heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceable and reasonable with the earthly wisdom which is earth-bound, sensual and demonic (under demonic influence). Paul proceeds to expound the nature and order of the Christian home.

God's Order: The Christian Home

3:18 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Scripture requires the wife to submit to her own husband (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1Pet 3:1). This is about the power of a woman over a man when she submits to him, sexually and otherwise. Female submission is a double-edged sword: it creates power through attraction but it leaves the woman vulnerable. A woman can create havoc with coquettish (flirting) behaviour where she plays at submission and can tantalise (stir up) male egos and expectations. Christian marriage is God's order for the expression of sexual and other desires and needs. The wife is to submit to her own husband and not to play at submitting to other husbands. This attitude of submission curtails restlessness in the woman and establishes emotional and moral security for the home. Submission by a wife is fitting (sustainable) in the Lord. Remember, the woman is the companion to the man (by God's design, Gen 2:21-25).

3:19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

This is the protection for the wife: she is to be loved by her husband. Women need to be loved; women look for love. Men need and look for respect. Therefore, the scripture says that the husband should love his wife and the wife should respect her husband (Eph 5:33). Women become vulnerable in that their offering of themselves may be abused. Men become vulnerable in that their (self) respect can be undermined by a woman who knows them too well. ('Behind every successful man is a surprised woman.') A wife certainly knows which button to press in her husband to get a certain reaction. So husband and wife are vulnerable to each other. This vulnerability is best protected and developed in the atmosphere of Christian love and caring. The husband is to avoid bitter words and actions. Christian marriage is their protection.

3:20 Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

Obedience is a virtue in the child. Someone has said that you do not have to train children to be naughty. Everyone growing up learns to express their independence and assert their own personal authority. There is a deep influence in human beings to resist authority. This rebellion first manifested itself in the Garden (Gen 3). But we learn to obey. Even Jesus learnt obedience by the things He endured (Heb 5:8). Part of parenting is learning to be a proper and adequate authority figure for the child. The child

should learn that authority need not be abusive or seducible but able to be respected for one's own ultimate benefit. God is pleased by obedience. It is the master virtue that makes other virtue possible and consistent. It is obedience that gets us to obey the command to love. We love out of obedience not out of feeling. Feelings will only complicate the love obedience. God is pleased because all authority (power) is ultimately from God (Rom 13:1, Col 1:16, 2:10). Those who despise authority will be judged (2Pet 2:9-10; Jude 1:8).

3:21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Fathers are not to provoke or create contention with their children. It is interesting that fathers are told not to do this, not mothers. Fathers have a prime responsibility in creating the moral and cognitive environment for their children so that their growth is encouraged not obstructed. To be disheartened has the sense of being cut off from the energies in the person. It means to be in a position of anti-desire or contradiction of the desire being constructed in the person. Faith is the requirement to build person. It can be so easily squandered or deranged in the young. It takes time to build the courage of personal intention.

3:22 Slaves, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord.

Slavery was the economic structure of the ancient world. Slaves were usually people from conquered nations. They could also be people who were in debt or unable to provide for themselves. American translations of the scriptures seem to avoid translating Greek 'doulos' as 'slave'. This may be because of the American experience of the slavery of the Negro/ black American. But 'slave' (= owned by another) is the preferred term that Paul uses to describe himself (Rom 1:1; 2Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1). This is similar for James (James 1:1), Peter (2Pet 1:1) and Jude (Jude 1:1). Slaves are to obey their masters who are over them in the flesh (the natural). They are to do this sincerely and genuinely. They are to be genuine workers, there being no duplicity, double-mindedness or double-dealing in their hearts. The singleness described is the single eye of Mtt 6:22. It is also the simplicity and the refusal to be complicated that is stated in verses such as Rom 12:8; 2Cor 1:12, 11:3; Eph 6:5. This singleness and uncomplicated nature is based on the fear of God. Before God there is no hiding or playing of posturing games.

3:23-24 Whatever you do, work genuinely [from your soul] as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

Whatever we do, we are to do it as though we were doing it for God and not people. This means that we do our best, as though making an offering to God and not calculating a response that is designed to control the situation to obtain maximum advantage from minimum effort. We can also approach a job with a purely survival attitude. It is a Christian virtue to not only do our best but to apply ourselves to the utmost. This is the attitude of giving rather than receiving. God is the great Giver. Jesus taught the importance of giving as a basic life attitude. 'Give and it shall be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be placed in your lap; for by the measure that you measure, it shall be measured back to you.' (Lk 6:38) There is laid up for the Christian an inheritance which is a reward (Mtt 6:19-21). This reward is guaranteed because it is made available by the Christ who is the Lord over all things.

3:25 But he who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong doing and there is no partiality [favouritism].

Once again there is the teaching of judgement. We live in a moral universe and God, the Creator, will bring His creation to His moral conclusion. People would love to avoid the consequences of their behaviour. Sometimes our conscience will not let us avoid the consequences of what we have done: we can make ourselves suffer. We need to be sure that we realise and believe that we will be judged and that we will give an account to God of what we have done in the flesh (Mtt 25; Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:12).

4:1 Masters, give to your slaves what is just and equal [fair], knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Masters [employers] are to treat their slaves [employees] justly and fairly. This is a responsibility of Christian management. Notice that Paul is not recommending a change in the economic structure. He is not suggesting that the slaves capture the power and themselves become masters. In most tasks there needs to be some form of management. But the way people are treated is essential to the Christian response. Oppressive structures can become just structures. If justice and equality cannot be brought about because of the structure then there may be a Christian responsibility to change the structure and not just replace the management. (Consider modern Zimbabwe: replace the white tyrant with the black tyrant.) The final perspective and orientation is that God is the ultimate Master.

So we have God's order:

1. Wives submit for it is fitting in God
2. Husbands love do not be bitter to your wife
3. Children obey for it is well-pleasing to God
4. Fathers encourage lest they become discouraged
5. Slaves obey for you serve the Lord Christ
6. Masters give for you have a Master in heaven.

4:2 Persevere in prayer, keeping watch in it with thanksgiving.

Prayer is a Christian discipline. Prayer is entering the spirit realm. Prayer is a way to receive heavenly information (revelation). Prayer creates heavenly attitude. We should be alert in prayer for what God is wanting to show us. We should watch and wait for revelation. He who watches is not waiting for a feeling or an ecstasy or a mood of tranquillity. One waits for revelation (Hab 2:1-4). So we keep going in prayer (and prayer attitude), sustained by thanksgiving (and praise and exaltation of God with the heavenly host Heb 12:1; Rev 5:8-14), waiting, watching and pressing into God.

4:3-4 Praying also for us that God may open a door for us to speak the message of the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may speak as I ought to speak.

Paul's heart and mission is to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles. This means that he is always looking for a way (a door of opportunity) to communicate the Gospel. The 'mystery of Christ' suggests that the message can take various forms and often depend upon the circumstances in which Paul finds himself. The Gospel has great depth and can handle faithful but flexible expression. Being chained adds urgency and potency to his presentation. Am I chained for Christ? Do I have the urgency of imprisonment?

4:5 Walk in wisdom towards those outside, redeeming the time.

We are to walk wisely (circumspectly) towards outsiders, not causing offence but also maintaining our truth. Time and opportunity can be lost, sold under laziness or unbelief. By faith

and obedience we can redeem lost opportunities and faithless comments. Our time is finite (Ps 90:12).

4:6 Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you ought to answer each one.

As we respond to each outsider, we should speak wisely and graciously with a conversation that is flavoured with the salt of experience and spirit sensitivity. Salt gives flavour and taste to food that may otherwise be tasteless and uninteresting. Jesus says 'For everyone will be seasoned with fire and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavour how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves and have peace with one another.' (Mk 9:49-50) In the tabernacle all sacrifices were to be seasoned with salt (Lev 2:10). Here seasoning is a testing, a maturing, a tasting and a flavouring. This, at least, makes for a fascinating conversation. May we rely on the secure salt of the Word of God that does not lose its flavour or capacity to spike a conversation.

4:7-18 Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister and fellow slave in the Lord will tell you all the news about me. I am sending him to you for this very purpose that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here. Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you with Mark the cousin of Barnabas ... Jesus called Justus ... these are my only fellow workers of the circumcision ... Epaphras strives for you in prayer that you be mature and fully assured in the will of God. Luke, the beloved physician greets you ... Say to Archippus 'Take heed to the ministry you received in the Lord, that you fulfil it.' You receive a ministry and you obey (fill out) its implications and requirements and you respond to (grow in) its challenges and excitements. This is the greeting by my own hand - Paul. Remember my chains. Grace be with you all.