

The Uncomfortable Beauty of a Christian Home

Col 3:18-4:1

What picture forms in your mind reading our passage in Colossians? Maybe you think of some outdated 1950s morality. Where a man makes demands from the couch and his wife runs around and does what he says? Perhaps you picture an overbearing father demanding obedience from his children? Maybe you struggle to conjure up any image at all, what with all the talk of slaves and masters.

Whatever it is, I suspect many of us form quite an uncomfortable picture. It can feel a bit icky, or even dangerous. You could be asking the question: doesn't this open up a door for every selfish and domineering man to have his way, and at the same time close the door for his wife and children, leaving them no way out?

These are real questions, and I hope that this morning we will not leave them easily dismissed. And yet, over the last few weeks we have all been struck by the beautiful pictures in Colossians of a church marked by foot-washing service and joyful song. And so either the early church was living with this incredible tension between celebrating sacrificial love in the church and enforcing the status quo in the home...or Perhaps Paul is showing us the same hard but good reality of life with Christ, and showing us what it means for our families too. And maybe, then, there is beauty in these verses too.

But what we need is not simply theological arguments, but refreshed imaginations. And this will happen, not by looking at the world around us today, or by harking back to some golden age of "family values". Instead we're need to look to the wisdom of the Scriptures, to the example of Jesus, and ultimately to his perfect love revealed on the

cross. And it's my hope that God would give us the eyes to see that Paul paints for us in these verses a picture of a household ruled by Christ. And that may still be uncomfortable, but I hope we might also find it beautiful.

A Picture of Wives and Husbands

So let's begin by considering Paul's instructions to wives and husbands. To wives he says,

Submit yourselves to you husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

To husbands he says,

Love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

And of course the elephant in the room is the word submit. One person said in a home group this week: that word submit has a lot to answer for. Deep down we might wish that it wasn't there.

But it is, and we need our imaginations refreshed by God's word to see what is really going on here. And so look at that passage printed in your outline from Song of Songs. Now Song of Songs is a strange book, but all you need to know for now is that it is a breathless and joy-filled song about the goodness of human marriage. This is what we read in chapter 2 of the Song, as the woman sings of her beloved:

³ Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest

is my beloved among the young men.

I delight to sit in his shade,

and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

⁴ Let him lead me to the banquet hall,

and let his banner over me be love.

⁵ Strengthen me with raisins,

*refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.
6 His left arm is under my head,
and his right arm embraces me.*

[and then down to verse 8]

*8 Listen! My beloved!
Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.*

*9 My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.
Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.*

*10 My beloved spoke and said to me,
"Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one, come with me."*

The biblical picture of marriage is not a dirge. It is an exuberant song! And so if we read Colossians as lifeless and oppressive we're doing it wrong. Like the woman who sings this song, the submission of a wife to her husband ought to be like the relief of finding shade on a hot day. Or the sweetness of fresh fruit from an apple tree. She rejoices to receive the protection and the provision, the safety and the security that her beloved offers her.

And, like her beloved, the husband is to lead his wife. But he leads her to a banquet. (Which I suppose means *he* is the one who arranges the food!) He has a God-given authority, but the banner he carries is one of love. He is not a raging bull, but a gentle gazelle. He doesn't burst in asserting his rights, rather he has a hushed reverence towards his wife.

And when he speaks to his wife, he does not command her but calls to her, that they might join in service together. His words are filled with encouragement and affection. Paul summarises all this in just a few words, *he loves his wife and is not harsh with her.*

And what's more this is a *royal* song. From the beginning of the Bible, husbands and wives are pictured as Kings and Queens. They are to move out into the world together, in service of the people around them. And here we see that husbands are to be priestly-kings, sharing God's blessing with his wife that together they may share that same blessing out in the church and in the world. God has given to husbands the responsibility of setting the tone of the marriage, so to speak. He is to ensure that the peace of Christ rules the home, just as it does the church. That the message of Christ would dwell richly in his family just like in the church. And that the name of Christ would be honoured in the household, just like in the church.

And by submitting to her husband, the wife honours and recognises the responsibility that God has given her husband, and humbly receives his service. Rather than dismissing him, or denying him, or always demanding more from him, like the woman in the Song, she expresses her delight for the way her husband loves her.

And so, as the theologian Russell Moore says, the picture here is not of a husband saying, "Woman, get me my chips." Nor is it a more sanctified version like "Blessed wife, please get my chips and then let's pray." It's not of the man standing over his wife, seeking to dominate her or making demands of her, and the wife just doing what he says. It's not a darwinian power struggle. And it's not even like a boardroom negotiation where the husband is family CEO who gets to have the final word. To borrow from C.S. Lewis, marriage is a dance, with the

husband leading gently but decisively, so that his wife would shine. It's like a head and a body moving in perfect coordination. It's a husband "crucifying his own power and privilege in order to love his wife" as Christ has loved the church. And a wife humbly receiving her husband's service, just as the church joyfully trusts in Christ.

Just a few verses earlier in Colossians we read that *Christ is all, and is in all*. More than anything else, the gospel secures the absolute equality of men and women, in the church and in the home. But the question is what will we *do* with this equality. And here in Colossians we are called away from focussing on *our rights*, and to think first of our *responsibility* to love and serve our husband or wife.

A focus on our rights leads to the finger pointing and blaming that has marred every human marriage since the first marriage fell in the garden. But here Paul presses us to see our equality as something not to be used to our own advantage, but to be used for the good of our spouse. Husbands and wives are called to give each other *far better than they deserve*, as a lived picture of God's lavish grace.

Song of Songs is a strange book to be sure, but is a beautiful picture of what Christian marriages look like. But even more than that, Christians have always read the Song as a picture of what the Christian gospel looks like. As Paul says in a similar passage in Ephesians 5, the relationship between men and women in marriage is a profound mystery. And it's a mystery that models to us the sacrificial love of Jesus and the humble faith of the church. And so the husband's service becomes an example for his wife as they move out into the world together. And the wife's submission becomes an example for her husband as they both humble themselves before the Lord together.

And so our marriages become little songs, in which we hear The Song of Christ's love.

And so it breaks my heart that when we speak of *this* picture, it is necessary for us to address the painful reality of domestic violence. Surely one of the reasons we struggle to see beauty in this passage, is because Christians have failed to live this passage. It's not the Bible that has a lot to answer for, but the church. What sadness that there are Christian homes where there is no peace. Where the message of Christ is not a rich blessing, but is twisted into a weapon of control and abuse. Where the name of Christ is not honoured but dragged through the mud.

And so can I speak first to those who may find themselves in such a household, where there is not a joyful song but fear and intimidation, through physical, or verbal, or emotional abuse. Let me say this as clearly as I can: submission does not require you to put up with abuse. Submission does not mean you must stay in an unsafe place. Submission does not require you to protect your abuser from the consequences of their sin.

In fact, if submission is setting aside your own interests for the sake of your husband, then doing the very courageous thing of seeking help, is in itself an act of humble service. Removing yourself from harm's way, may set your husband on a path to repenting from his destructive ways. And so I have printed in the sermon outline today the details of several places where you may be able to find care and counsel. And in particular can I invite you to speak to someone at church you trust, or to Simon or Kathy or myself. We will not ignore you, we will listen to you, and as a church family we will seek to practically care for you.

Secondly, can I address any husbands who *are* using this passage as a weapon. Again, can I say this very clearly: you are not the Lord of your home, Jesus is. And to use *his* word to crush your wife is a terrible wickedness. And though you may be able to control your wife, and though you may be able to fool people like me, you will not fool him. Jesus is a King who *always* stands with the suffering, and who rises up to defend the downtrodden. Jesus is not in your corner and it will be a fearful thing for you to face his judgement. And so I urge you to repent of your sin. Give up control and collapse into the arms of Christ, that you might learn from *him* what it really means to be a man. If that is you, have the courage to come and speak to me or to Simon. We will not wink at your sin, but we will be willing walk the path of repentance with you so that you might learn to walk the way of Jesus.

And finally, can I speak to the men of our church more generally. Because I suspect that most of us don't walk in to church today as hypocritical Pharisees, but as exhausted disciples. As I look around at men in our culture I see a broad and deep malaise. Some men may express that in lashing out at those around them, but many more are passive and aloof. For every violent husband there are husbands who are disengaged and withdrawn into their own little worlds. They are selfishly satisfying their own pleasures in virtual worlds of pornography and video games, all the while neglecting their high calling to sacrificially serve those around them. Many Christian men, too, are weighed down by a sense of their own responsibility and carrying a burden of guilt for all their own failures.

Dear brothers, that is exactly the place we need to begin. For Jesus can do far more with a man who limps than with one who swaggers. And he says to us, *come to me and find rest, come and learn from my*

gentle and humble heart. If we are to be the men God is calling us to be, if we are to be priestly kings who cause our wives and families to sing, then we will be men who live life on our knees. We will get down on our knees before God in humble faith, asking him to give us the strength we need. And then we will live on our knees in unceasing service of our families. I have been praying this week that our church would be filled with such men, men who are free from the need to be in control, men who know Jesus as their loving Lord, and men who are known as those who pour themselves out in passionate, loving service of their wives. May it be so among us. All for the honour of Christ.

A Picture of Children and Parents

And we pray the same thing for relationships between children and their parents, don't we? Consider again Paul's words in Colossians:

To children he says:

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

To parents, and specifically Fathers, he says:

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

And again, if we look to the wisdom of the Scriptures we're given another life-giving picture of what this means. This time from the book of Proverbs, another *royal book*, as the King passes on instruction to his Son.

We read in Proverbs 2:

*¹ My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
² turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
³ indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
⁴ and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
⁷ He holds success in store for the upright,*

he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,

⁸ for he guards the course of the just

and protects the way of his faithful ones.

⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just

and fair—every good path.

¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart,

and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

I love this picture. The idea here is that the world is a challenging and often confusing place. And to flourish in the world a child needs guidance and direction. And in my mind's eye I see a parent getting down onto the level of their son or daughter, pointing out to them the dangers and the delights of this world. Steering them away from wickedness and guiding them towards righteousness. Not just giving them rules to follow, but helping them to grow in the wisdom they need to think and act rightly in the world.

And most wonderfully, the Proverbial parent points beyond themselves to the instruction of the Lord. Godly Fathers don't bear down upon their kids, but they get down with them, that together they would call out to God for insight and cry aloud for understanding.

And so yes, there will be frustrating, or even infuriating!, moments when parents have to get their kids to do hard but good things, or when they remove desirable but damaging things. But the overall tone of such a family is not embittering, but pleasant to the soul. There is not discouragement, but a filling up with courage so that boys and girls would grow to be royal children of God, faithfully serving him in the world.

Once again, however, our lives often feel like a cracked mirror, rather than a pure reflection of this picture.

There is a reason why the absent or overbearing Father is such a common cultural image. There are kids who live without a Father, or single mothers seeking to do this work entirely on their own. There are children who go out in the world completely drained of strength, as they are worn down in their homes. And no doubt there are parents filled with guilt at their own failures. It's fair to say that in our families we need a lot of grace.

And there is grace to be found. There's grace to be found in the fact that the Bible takes family language and applies it to the church. In fact, even these instructions are literally embedded within instructions to the whole church. In God's kindness we can find brothers and sisters to walk with us and help us in loving our families. We can find spiritual mothers and fathers who can step into a void and offer the sweetness and strength that comes in the gospel. And together we can weep and mourn for our own failures, crying out together for God's help and calling out for his grace.

For once again our imperfect families are signposts to the divine family of God. In God we find a perfect Heavenly Father. We find the rod and staff of his discipline to be a sweet comfort as we walk through the valley. He's the Father who got down on our level in the sending of his Son. And he's the Father who gives us his Spirit, filling us with courage, so we can live faithfully as his adopted sons and daughters. For in the end, we are all but little children before the Lord, learning obedience and growing into the mature image of Jesus, our older brother.

A Picture of Slaves and Masters

Which leads us to the final picture of slaves and masters. And here we move from the Wisdom of the Scriptures, to the example of Jesus. For Jesus is our older brother, but he is also our Master. And counter-intuitively he is also our Servant.

And so as we picture again Jesus washing his disciples' feet, stooping down to do the work of a slave, it helps us to understand why we today can only picture slavery as something evil and absurd.

For in those few verses from John 13, Jesus says that the disciples are right to call him their Lord. But in his actions he shows them that following him, means serving like him. And so Christian masters are called to become servants, even of their slaves. In the Roman world, a master could do pretty much as they pleased to their slaves. But not Christian masters. Paul says in Colossians 4:1,

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

But not only that, Christian slaves become the brothers and sisters to their masters. In Christ, they too are promised a heavenly inheritance from God. There is no slave or free in Christ remember! Later in Colossians we're told about a man called Onesimus who was actually a runaway slave: and Paul refers to him as *our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.*

As Martin Luther said centuries later. Every Christian is a completely free Lord of all! And every Christian is a humble slave, called to serve the Lord, and all the people around them. And so Paul's words are like a depth charge placed under the institution of slavery that mean the whole thing will eventually collapse into absurdity.

As Rebecca McLaughlin writes in answer to the question of whether the Bible condones slavery,

[Passages like this argue] against slavery ... by cutting the legs out from under it. Jesus inhabited the slave role. Paul calls himself a slave of Christ, loves a runaway slave as his very heart [see Philemon], and insists that slave and free are equal in Christ. With no room for superiority, exploitation, or coercion, but rather brotherhood and shared identity, the NT created a tectonic tension that would ultimately erupt in the abolition of slavery.

And this is a helpful place for us to finish because it takes us to the very heart of this passage. The transformative power of Paul's words here lie in the fact that he removes *powerful men from the throne*, and he places Jesus there instead. Do you notice wives are to submit themselves *as is fitting in the Lord*. Children and slaves are to obey and to serve *in the Lord*. Paul is painting a picture of a household where Jesus is Lord.

And as we've seen, Jesus is a Lord with a gentle and lowly heart. He is a master who lives to serve and to save. Jesus is a King who does not rule with an iron fist, but with pierced hands and feet. He is the cosmic Christ who holds everything together not with raw power, but by his blood shed on the cross.

And so if Jesus is to be the Lord of our homes, what they really ought to look like is a cross. In all of this, God's ultimate goal is not to make us "real men" or "real women", or to uphold "family values". Rather he is driving us away from ourselves and toward one another, and toward the cross. We are people who have been purchased through the cross, who are propelled forward by the cross, and so our families ought to be pictures of the cross.

And I would argue that the cross is just as uncomfortable, and just as counter-cultural, to us in 21st century Northbridge, as it was to those in 1st century Colossæ.

And so as we stumble through family life, God is using our fumbling attempts at service to shape us into Christ's image, and shine the light of the gospel to those around us. When the beauty of the gospel shines through in our relationships, Christ is honoured. In the failure and frustration of our imperfect families, our yearning for Christ grows. Husbands and wives together grow in their longing to be united with Christ as his bride. Parents and children together grow in their appreciation for their adoption to God as his children. Slaves and masters together grow in their commitment to serve the Lord, their Master, as full heirs in his Kingdom.

These verses are uncomfortable to us because ultimately they call us to carry our cross in all the stress and strain of normal family life. But they also point us to the gospel comfort that in Christ we have a perfect husband worthy of total submission. We have a perfect Father who is worthy of total obedience. And we have a Master in heaven, in whose service is perfect freedom.

And that, brothers and sisters, really is beautiful.

Let's pray.