

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Women, Slaves, and Masters: Is Jesus-centeredness culturally relevant?

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Mark Vroegop

18 Wives, submit 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 provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. 4 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (Col 3:18-4:1).

Two weeks ago, I took up the subject of what it means for a husband to love his wife and for children to obey their parents from Colossians 3:19-21. I intentionally skipped over what it means for wives to submit to their husbands, and I decided to talk about women, slaves, and masters in one message.

It has been an interesting two weeks to get your comments, feedback, and even a few raised eyebrows. For instance, I've had husbands who asked me if I was going to be as tough on the women as I was on men. I've had people ask me any number of questions, hoping that I would be able to settle some important questions in their minds. And I've had someone jokingly suggest that I was lumping women and slaves together to make a subtle point. For the record, I did not do that.

The flurry of discussion though reminded me that the issues of Jesus-centeredness at home and in the workplace are very relevant to where we live. Additionally, there is a measure of controversy surrounding this text, particularly regarding the role of women. So I'm glad that I've had two weeks to think, pray, and read. The issues that we deal with today are real, relevant, and important. I hope to help us think biblically so that we can live practically. My aim is to address two things:

1. I want to help you think through how to handle some tough questions for this passage – questions that relate to how you interpret the Bible. If you've never faced these questions before, you will. It may not be on this issue but it will come up on other fronts.

2. I want to specifically help us understand how we are to apply Jesus centeredness to womanhood and the workplace. What does it mean to be a godly, biblical, and Jesus-centered woman in 2008? How should Jesus impact your role in the workplace?

So that is our aim, and I hope that today is helpful in leading you to better understanding of how we can apply the Word in our lives.

A Bigger Question: How to Understand the Bible?

Underneath this text is a big question – namely, how do you understand the Bible? This is a bigger question because it really informs the answers at which you arrive. How you read and interpret the Bible has a direct impact in your conclusions. So the issues in play here are not just about women, slaves, and masters.

Let me give you two questions that identify and illustrate the problem:

1. Does the Bible support slavery?
2. If you argue that the Bible's teaching on slavery is a matter of cultural context (slavery was legal then and it is not now), then to what extent does that cultural argument apply to the other roles, particularly women?

I trust you can see why this is important. In its extreme form, there are some who argue like this: "The Bible seems to support the institution of slavery, and the only way to get around that issue is an appeal to cultural context—that the teaching to slaves should be applied differently today because of the cultural differences. Further, since the cultural role of women has also changed, we need see the Bible through a similar lens when it comes to the roles of men and women in marriage and in the church. And finally, we must also see sexual ethics should also through this lens and make the case that monogamous homosexuality is no longer sinful."

Underneath the discussion of slaves, women, and homosexuality is an important question as to how you deal with cultural matters and when do you apply those principles. Please understand, not everyone takes it to that extreme, but some people and denominations have. So it is important for you to understand the nature of these issues, and for you to realize that underneath some pretty familiar topics (like submission) is a very important issue as to how you study the Bible.

So let me answer each of the questions that I raised to try and help us think through these issues:

Does the Bible support slavery? No. The New Testament never commanded slavery; rather Paul is providing instruction as to how slavery in his day was to be regulated, and the

instructions to slaves should not be inferred as an endorsement of the institution of slavery. There are three reasons why I think this is the case: 1) The Bible clearly indicates that forcefully putting someone into slavery was morally wrong (1 Tim 1:10), and slavery in the New Testament was significantly different than the slavery in the history of the United States. I do not think that Paul has slavery as we know it in mind when he writes Colossians. 2) The Bible frequently gives instructions on how to conduct oneself in evil situations while making no endorsement of the situation itself (e.g., divorce – Matt 19:1-10; persecution – Matt 5:43-48; unjust laws – Matt 5:41). Therefore, the Bible regulates slavery without inferring divine approval. 3) Further, the Bible makes specific statements about the equality of slaves and masters (e.g., Philemon 16, Eph 6:9, 1 Tim 6:1-2), and calls for slaves to free themselves if possible (1 Cor 7:21).

Therefore, I think that the Bible gives principles for how slaves should conduct themselves without endorsing slavery, and I think that those principles should be transferred to workplace relationships today. So please don't let anyone tell you that the Bible supported or encouraged slavery. A careful look at the passages shows that this is simply not the case.

Does the cultural context relate to the command for women as well? I do not believe that the distinction of roles for women is a cultural issue in the same way as it is for the issue of slavery. Why? 1) The role distinction is based upon an appeal to creation, thereby putting it above cultural context (Eph 5:31-32, 1 Tim 2:12-13). 2) The teaching of role distinction is very clear (1 Cor 11:3, 1 Tim 2:12-23), and the Bible never indicates that these roles change. 3) There is a clear sense that role distinction does not equal inequality (Gal 3:28).

Therefore it seems clear to me that the interpretive issues surrounding slaves do not apply to in same way to women. Although some would like to link these two issues, there are different.¹ The Bible's teaching regarding women seems to be clear, even if it is a bit uncomfortable at times.

You see the last thing that I'd want to do is to somehow communicate that women are less in value, that they don't play a very important role in ministry, and that we can't learn and serve together. That really is not my heart which is why I get a bit nervous when someone asks me about the roles of men and women – especially in the church. However, I cannot get around the content of certain texts. They seem very clear; and at the end of the day the Bible, not my

¹ *How should we think about cultural context questions?* Clearly there are times when the right understanding of a passage leads to a general principle which is applied in the present context differently than how it was in the New Testament (e.g., applying slaves to masters principles as employee to employer principles). How do we determine when to do this? 1) We have to look to the context for clues. For example, 1 Tim 2:9-10 should not be applied as biblical prohibition against braids, gold jewelry, or pearls. The warning is on a focus upon appearances at the neglect of godliness or modesty. 2) We have to look at other passages to see if there is a specific requirement or a biblical principle. 1 Peter 3:3-5 would be a great example of this in light of 1 Tim 2, where the principle is clearly affirmed. 3) We need to examine if the cultural command is specifically grounded in the nature of God, the created order, or the gospel. A good example of this would be 1 Timothy 2:12 where the primary spiritual leadership of men in a church is connected to creation.

opinions, must guide my life. So we must labor to be true to the text, avoiding over-reaction from the errors of the past, or interpreting passages in light of our experiences or desires.

As you can see these are complicated matters. Undergirding Colossians 3:18-4:1 is are important questions about how we interpret the Bible, what we obey literally, and what we apply in principle. I've taken time to walk you through this because I think it is important, and because I think the getting the hermeneutics wrong can lead you down some very wrong paths. And finally, I do think that sloppy hermeneutics that bends the Bible to culture leads to a lessening of the authority of the Bible in our lives. We must be people of the text, and that requires careful thought and willing obedience.

This is important because underneath the call for wives to submit, slaves to obey, and masters to be fair is a commitment to order our lives according to the text. In other words we are submissive to what the Bible calls us to do.

Jesus-centered Women (v 18)

In Colossians, each member of the household is called to specific areas of obedience. Husbands are to love their wives, children are to obey their parents, and the primary call of a wife is to submission.

The word submission (*hupotasso*) means to place oneself under. The word is in the middle voice which means that it is something that you personally do or for yourself. So it means to submit voluntarily. The word is also used for the submission of Christ to the Father (1 Cor 15:28), the mutual submission that we have with one another (Eph 5:21).

The basis of this submission is twofold. First, it is based upon a divinely given ordering of life. The Bible clearly identifies a hierarchy of leadership and responsibility in 1 Cor 11:3, 7-9, and Eph 5:23-24. This God-given structure, while saying nothing about value, forms the base: "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." Secondly, submission is based upon reverence and love for Christ. Colossians 3:18 explicitly says "in the Lord." Therefore, the motivation for embracing willing and joyful submission is the Lordship of Christ. In other words, this is a means of worshipping and submitting to Christ.

What we see here is the beautiful way that the Jesus being the core transforms earthly relationships. Christ doesn't negate earthly relationships; he lifts them up to a higher plane.²

² F.F. Bruce. The Epistle to the Colossians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmanns, 1984. P. 164. Quoting C.F.D. Moule – The Origin of Christianity.

You see, there is something gloriously beautiful about a woman who understands and embraces Jesus-centered submission. It is godly adornment.

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives— 2 when they see your respectful and pure conduct... For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their husbands (1 Peter 3:1-2, 5).

And there is something inherently wrong with a woman who fails to embrace this:

"...train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled" (Titus 2:4-5).

Positively, I see Jesus-centered womanhood as a spirit and actions that honor God-given authority, express love for Christ through submission, and embrace the value and importance of supportive roles and ministry.

Now let me clarify a few things that submission is not. A number of years ago I found helpful list. Granted it pushes alliteration to the limits, but there are important points to consider. Submission is not:

- Inequality – men and women have equal value as image bearers; function does not equal value.
- Infallibility of the husband – men need help and input from their wives.
- Immobility – some women think that submission means complete passivity. Submission is an active word filled with lots of opportunity.
- Inarticulation – this does not mean that you cannot share your opinion or your view.
- Intellectual stagnation – you should not let your husband do your thinking for you.
- Influence impossible – you have great influence, and submission does not negate that.
- Iniquitous manipulation – you should not use your position to manipulate – "He may be the head, but I'm the neck that moves the head."

Now I realize that there are some women who long for their husbands to lead, and you would find it much easier to submit if you husband were out in front. What do you do?

1. **Start with your heart.** First, take careful inventory to be sure that you are not setting an unbiblical or overly idealized standard for what headship and leadership looks like. Be sure that you aren't developing a "if I was leading – this is what I would do" kind of mentality.
2. **Pray.** More than anything I'd encourage you to seek God's face since real change comes from him, and he alone really knows your husband's heart.

3. **Cheer.** When your husband evidences areas of leadership encourage him, praise him, and specifically tell him how his leadership was effective and how it helps.
4. **Talk but don't nag.** I think it is appropriate for you to share concerns but be careful that you do not nag him.
5. **Model.** Demonstrate godliness and appropriate feminine leadership so that you might provide a level of example.

There is something gloriously God-centered about a woman who loves Jesus, cherishes the Bible, honors her husband, takes care of her children, and gives her life in service to others. There are so many ways that women can make much of the glory of God and display the worth of Jesus to our world. Embracing submission has very little to do with the worth or performance of your husband. It has everything to do with the worth and example of Jesus.

Women, God calls you to express your Jesus-centeredness through godly submission.

Jesus-centered Work (3:22-4:1)

The final piece here relates to relationships in another authority context – employees and employers. It is amazing to see another example of the way that Jesus transforms every area of life. Let's see how that works out.

Employees are given the following commands:

- **Obey in everything (v 22a).** We do not get to pick and choose what things we choose to follow. 1 Peter 2:18 expands this telling us that we must obey the good and gentle but also the unjust. Agreement with the boss or liking the boss is not a prerequisite for following him or her.
- **Obey with sincerity and integrity (v 22b).** The phrase "eye-service" means the kind of obedience only when the boss is looking or coming around. Jesus-centered workers are conscientious workers.
- **See work as worship (v 23-24).** Jesus-centered workers see that their gifts, their strength, and their life as a gift from God to be used as an offering of worship to Jesus.
- **We are accountable (v 25).** The ultimate accountability for our lives comes from Jesus.

Employers are also given instructions:

- **Be fair and just (v 1a).** People in authority should not take advantage of their position and use it to be abusive (Eph 6:9). We must realize that every position of authority comes because of God's authority (Rom 13:1). Therefore, authority needs to be used in a fair and just way.

- **You are accountable (v 1b).** People in authority must realize that there is someone greater than them and one day we will all give an account. So there is no absolute power. All power is dependent upon the power and rule of God.

Paul's point here is simple and yet profound: work is worship. There is a stunning vision here of the way that the gospel could be clearly seen and demonstrated. God calls us to transform the marketplace into a platform for the gospel. Let me press this with a few questions:

- Are you known as a hard-working, conscientious person who is full of integrity?
- When your boss looks that this list of employees, do you bring joy or grief to his or her heart?
- Do you show subtle signs of disrespect?
- Do people come to you with complaints about the management team?
- Can you obey someone who you don't respect?
- Do you work harder on the projects that you know are inspected?
- Do your employees know you as a fair and honest person?
- Can they express concern and give input without fear?

Five days a week you are in direct contact with people who get to know you by the work you produce and the way that you lead. My question is very simple: do they see anything that reflects Jesus? I want to remind you that the endgame for your employment is not a paycheck or a promotion. It is this statement: Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men (Col 3:23). Jesus-centered living transforms everything, especially how we work.

The power of the gospel is amazing, isn't it? It transforms every relationship that we know. The Lordship of Christ extends to all areas of life in ways that are revolutionary. College Park I want you to see that there is a powerful opportunity in all of our relationships. We can show people that following Jesus works. We show them that when...

- Husbands love their wives
- Children obey their parents
- Wives are submissive
- Employees work as unto the Lord
- Employers are known as fair and just

The hope for the family, the church, and the nation is each of us in our distinctive roles asking one very important question: what does it mean today for Jesus to be the core?

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com