

**Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ  
Trusting God in All Relationships  
Colossians 3:18-4:1**

**What is the one thing in this world that you desire more than anything else? If you could keep it to one or two words, what would your answer be? Love? Purpose? Significance? Fulfilling job? Security? Fame? Fortune? All the above?**

**At this point you probably think I am going to pick one of the pursuits that I mentioned and say, “This is priority,” or, you may expect me to pull a fast one and say something outside of the list, something like, “You’re wrong – it’s Jesus.” Jesus is always a good answer, right? That is not what I am going to do. In fact, although you could say that this is even more trickery, the text that we are going to read and study this morning is going to lead us to contemplate *giving up* the one thing that is, in fact, at the core of who we are and what most of us want most in this life – autonomy.**

**The freedom to live our lives the way we desire and the independence to control our own destiny, irrational as such a notion is, is probably the greatest desire for most of us, whether we will admit it or not. Oh, sure, we understand that family and social structures limit our autonomy at some level, but if we can make things happen to best suit our own needs and desires, then we will do it. We will dominate or complain or manipulate others to secure our own way. If someone is holding us back, discard him or find a way to get around her. Hey, we all struggle with inappropriate motives and I surely hope that I am not as cynical as I may seem. You may very well have others’ best interests in mind, but since I know my own tendencies toward selfishness and control, and since Scripture is constantly calling us to humility and forgiveness, as we saw last week in Colossians 3:12-17, there seems to be a human bent toward the need to control.**

**Today's text is Colossians 3:18-4:1. It is our last Sunday in the book of Colossians since we have recently studied Colossians 4:2-6 – and because we have run out of time. Next week will be the first of five Sundays in a mini-series called Gospel Community as Witness, which is, in fact, the five-week conclusion to the series of this past school year, titled “Engage the World with the Gospel.” In just a few moments, we will stand as today's text is read – Colossians 3:18-4:1. I had planned to read all the way through the end of chapter 4 to give us a sense of closure on Colossians, but there is not time, so I will have to do with encouraging you to read all of Colossians 4 this afternoon. I do want to prepare you, though, for the section of Scripture we will read.**

**Colossians 3:18-4:1 will present God's order for our relationships with others – husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee. Well, the last one is master and slave, but the application is boss and worker. Chances are that some of what we will read will rub you the wrong way. Why? Our desire for autonomy in relationships,. But we believe Colossians is God's Word, correct? Yes, and although many abuse the order and structure found in the relationships we will consider today, our response to the truth of Scripture will indicate whether we trust God to be sovereign over all things and all people and all relationships in this world and in the next – or, not. If that doesn't make sense to you, now, I hope it will by the end of the morning. Furthermore, the mention of slavery, which is thankfully no longer an institution, will be difficult to process, especially in light of this weekend's events. I promise you that I will address all of that as we go. Keep your heart open, brothers and sisters.**

**Colossians 3:18-4:1 is our text. I will be reading from the ESV. Would you please stand for the reading of Scripture?**

**3:18 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 Bondservants, 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.**

**4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.**

**I hope, as we have worked our way through Colossians these past few months that you have remembered the theme to Colossians – *The Supremacy of Christ*. The Supremacy of Christ over all Creation, over all philosophies and religions, and over our lives, as believers. He has authority over all lives, whether men and women acknowledge his authority or not, but the focus of Colossians 3 has been the willful submission of believers to Jesus through putting off the old man with the sinful deeds of the flesh and the putting on of the new man and the Christlike traits of compassion, humility, and a forgiving spirit – and that is the short version.**

**This morning we will be called to submit to human authorities. You may be thinking, “I am quite happy to submit to Jesus, but I ain’t submitting to no man.” Autonomy. In fact, we cannot submit to Jesus if we fail to submit to the people in the structures that God has established and regulated. Before you get too upset, let me assure you that extreme versions of authority are never affirmed in the Bible as God’s design. God’s design is for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, and for that we pray, recognizing that it will**

**only be fully realized when Jesus reigns in the established Kingdom of God.**

**Having so acknowledged, we will see how the Lord expects believers to conduct themselves in relationships that have an impact on society. Often, on Sunday mornings, the order is to work through the text and then consider application for our lives in 2017. This morning, though, we will work backwards. I will give four biblical principles for family and work relationships and then we will examine the text. I want to ask you to please not jump to conclusions about any point raised as it is given, but wait until the end of the message before you ask, “Are you trying to tell me . . .?” Most questions will be answered in time. To the principles. First:**

- 1. Leadership and submission in relationships are matters of the heart**

**There are some authorities we are required to obey in government and work contexts that are not the same as family and/or communal relationships, but God’s instructions always involve the heart when it comes to leading and submitting. You could find the types of instructions that we will read today in Greco-Roman culture, but secular lists and orders lacked the heart component to which God’s children were, and, are, called. Second:**

- 2. The biblical order of Christian relationship in this life puts more responsibility on the one who is called to submit**

**This is one of those moments where you may be tempted to say, “Whaaaaattttt???” Read it carefully – in this life. Also, let me say up front that I do not mean that you should submit no matter what. I am NOT saying that you should stay in an abusive relationship. If your spouse is unfaithful to you, then you are free to divorce and remarry. Jesus said so, not me. While you may think, “Yes, but it is**

**always best to try to salvage the marriage,” I would agree with you, but be careful not to be more spiritual than Jesus. If you know someone whose spouse committed adultery, he/she is free to walk. Help the couple to reconcile, if possible – that is always best – but staying in the marriage is not required. I only make these points to make sure that you understand what I am not saying. What Scripture *is* saying, though, is that in this life, if you are the one who is called to submit or obey, when you are at an impasse with the established authority in your life, you are called to yield. Furthermore, you are called to do so with a proper heart attitude. That’s tough. It is eased somewhat by the next point:**

- 3. The biblical principle for leadership is that leaders will be held to a far greater accountability when they stand before Jesus**

**James 3:1 says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” In Jesus’ parables, managers were often called to account and those who mistreated servants were treated harshly. One of the reasons it may be difficult to submit from the heart and to lead with kindness and justice is that we think this life is all there is. And, if this life is all there is, then followers think, “How is this fair?” and leaders think, “I don’t care – I am in the position of power so deal with it.” The ways that we follow and lead tell a lot about what we truly believe about the next life. Last:**

- 4. There are times when “we must obey God rather than men,” but such times are the exception rather than the rule**

**There are times when we are called to disobey our authorities. There will be consequences, but if your boss tells you to cheat someone else, you will have to refuse to do so, even if you are fired. If your husband tells you to do something immoral, you should refuse. If the government tells you what you can and cannot say**

**about Jesus, you are called to follow the Lord, understanding that you may suffer consequences for your stand. But the times that you are required to do something against your Christian beliefs, at least at this point and time in our land, will be the exception rather than the rule, though, so do not waste time looking for the exceptions. You will see just how far we are called to go in obeying and submitting when we get to the text – which is right now.**

**Let's look at Colossians 3:18: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Remember the context for this seemingly abrupt start of the discussions about relationships, beginning with Colossians 3:1. We are united with Christ, which should make a difference in the way we live, putting away lust and anger and many related sins, while at the same time working to build up the covenant community through kindness and humility and forgiveness, and then in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."**

**Do everything in the name of Jesus – and wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. That does not mean, "*When* it is fitting," but, "*Because* it is fitting in the Lord." You will notice in each of the three pairs of relationships mentioned here – husband/wife, parent/child, master/slave – the person called to submit is addressed first. That is significant. It indicates, as already noted, a greater responsibility to yield in this life. Another point of interest, here, is that the submission of the wife is voluntary as opposed to the obedience of the child and the slave. In other words, submission is a matter of the heart. There are several times in the NT when wives are called to submit to their husbands. In 1 Peter 3, believing wives are called to submit to unbelieving husbands and there is some thought that Peter was even saying if your husband forbids you to go to church, you are to submit to him, with the goal of your respectful and pure conduct being an influence in his**

**conversion. I understand that husbands can be harsh and it gets tricky as to when too much is too much, but God has called for the husband to be the leader in the marriage relationship.**

**This is a hard word for wives, especially in a culture in which women have understandably had it with men's abuse and are standing up for their rights. But, what does the Bible say about our rights – or, our autonomy? We are to give up our rights. That goes for leaders in relationships as well. Verse 19: “Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.” In other words, do not use your greater physical strength and your strong will to assert your authority. Do not be bitter with your wives, it says in some of your translations. Husbands, as leaders, have a great privilege in marriage as well as a great responsibility. When I make a general statement about men and women, I recognize that it is not always true, but it often is – at least in my mind. It seems to me that women tend to be more responsive than men. So, if a woman respects and submits to her husband as she should, it may not result in her husband loving her as he is called to love her, although 1 Peter surely holds out that possibility. But, if a husband loves his wife sacrificially, it is likely that she will respond positively to his Christlike leadership. Husbands, you are going to have to get over yourselves if you are going to love your wives in the way that Jesus loves us, as you are commanded to do.**

**Colossians was written by the Apostle Paul about the same time he wrote Ephesians and Philemon. In Ephesians 5, Paul utilizes far more space writing to husbands about their responsibilities than he does while instructing wives. Husbands are told to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Leading your wife is not about exerting your will, but, rather, about dying to your own desires and caring tenderly for her in the most extraordinary ways. 1 Peter 3:7 says to live with your wife according to understanding so that your prayers will not be**

**hindered. It is a reminder that we are being held accountable for the way that we lead. So much more that could be said, but, alas . . .**

**Verses 20-21: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” Did you hear that, children? Obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Wow! Everything! How are you doing with this command? Your parents are bigger than you and they can punish you if you do wrong and they can withhold privileges from you – but that is not the reason you should obey them. You should obey because it pleases the Lord.**

**Parents – especially fathers – do not provoke your children to anger with your own anger or with inconsistent living or inconsistent discipline. You have power over your children in many ways when they are young, but if you squander your privileges in the early years, you may find that discouraged children become bitter teenagers and want little if anything to do with the Lord. Psalm 127:4 says, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.” You have the power to direct them for good, but if you are mean and harsh – well, you know. Do not think that I am blaming you if your children have gone astray – each one of us is responsible for him or herself in the end. This is a good reminder, though, to both lead and submit with the Lord in mind. Nowhere is our responsibility more clearly seen than in these next few verses.**

**Verse 22: “Bondservants, 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.” Paul was addressing Christian slaves just as he would address Christian slave-owners in the following instructions. Does that mess with your mind? Me too! A few things to say. First, slavery in the first century was far less brutal than the chattel slavery of early America. Furthermore, Paul was not commending the institution of slavery, but, rather, at the**

**Lord's direction, he regulated life under slavery for believers. As much as we recoil against the idea, there was no thought whatsoever in Paul's day of overturning the institution of slavery, so remember when reading these commands, it was a far different day. Our own shameful past with slavery is far more recent than any of us would like to think it is. Yesterday's activities in Charlottesville, VA show us how far we have, as a nation, to go. The notion that my race is better than your race is despicable – and, a sin that needs to be repented of and forgiven.**

**Even as commentators disparaged the legacy of some and commended the great founding fathers of our nation like Washington and Jefferson I thought, "Hmm – Washington and Jefferson both owned slaves." It is true that Washington struggled with the idea of slaves and in his will, he freed all the slaves that he was legally allowed to set free upon the death of Martha Washington, but he was, nonetheless, a slave owner who acted like a slave owner. Jefferson argued passionately against slavery – and bought and sold slaves and, on occasion, mistreated them. In other words, what is unthinkable now was reality not long ago. On the other hand, those who worked for the emancipation of slaves appealed powerfully and appropriately to Scripture. If you were wondering, I am aware that illegal slavery is very much alive in our time, but thankfully it is illegal in most places. Even so, when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, the legal and accepted institution of slavery was not going to change for a very long time.**

**I have not, thus far, stated the close relationship between the NT books of Colossians and Philemon. Most likely the Colossian Church met in Philemon's house, and so the letter to the Colossian Church would have been read in his house. In Paul's personal greetings in Colossians 4, Onesimus was mentioned as a faithful and beloved brother, and one of you. Onesimus, as recounted in Paul's letter to Philemon, had been Philemon's slave and had run away to**

Rome, likely carrying some of his master's money with him. According to God's beautiful sovereign plan, Onesimus was saved and became a great help to Paul while in prison. Philemon, the owner, had probably been saved several years earlier when Paul ministered in Ephesus. Now, Paul was calling on Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother. Paul did not require Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom, but he did strongly encourage him to forgive his slave and treat him as a brother in Christ. That is amazing! By law, Philemon could have called for Onesimus' execution, but Paul called him to exercise compassion and forgiveness.

Remember, when Paul's letter to the Colossians was being read, both Philemon and Onesimus would have been present. Even though we thankfully do not apply these words today to slaves and owners – how horrible even the thought – we certainly find ready application of these words in employer/employee relationships. So, let's read these verses and allow the text to speak for itself. When we finish, I will give one last word for all of us from these verses:

**22 Bondservants, 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. 4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.**

Since there was no hope, in the first century, that slavery would be abandoned as an institution, can you imagine how grateful slaves were to hear that slaveowners would be held accountable by God? Not only was there a promise of justice, in Paul's words, but there

was also the prospect that slaves would be treated better because of such a reminder.

To slaves, Paul said to work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward*. An inheritance! Imagine what that must have meant to slaves! The inheritance of eternal life is the promise for all believers, and it is the motivation to be a submissive wife, a loving husband, an obedient child, to be patient and godly parents, an honest and diligent employee, and a kind and caring boss. If we trust that the Lord's ways are best and that his design is perfect despite imperfect people who lead and who follow, our reward will be great in heaven. I am convinced that more than anything else, God wants us to trust him in all things. He even wants us to trust him enough to follow his design for relationships with our whole heart. When we do, others may be confused initially, but in the end, there is a decent possibility that they will acknowledge the supremacy of Christ in our lives, and, in some cases, be drawn to acknowledge the supremacy of Christ in their own lives. Amen. Let's pray.