

Relationships in the Home Part One

Col. 3:18-4:1

C.S. Lewis was sitting in church one day when the pastor began to speak about the importance of the home. "The home," the pastor said, "is the foundation of our national life. It is there, all said and done, that character is formed. It is there that we appear as we really are. It is there we can fling aside the weary disguises of the outer world and be ourselves."¹

At that point, a strange tension filled the room. People began to cough awkwardly, pews began to creak with the sound of fidgeting, and Lewis knew that in the minds of the congregation the sermon was over and they had stopped listening. CS Lewis himself stopped listening to the pastor and allowed his mind to think about other things. The reason? CS Lewis and the congregation knew what the pastor's home life was like and his words about the home and his life in the home didn't match up. Therefore no one could take his words seriously.

This story is found in an article CS Lewis wrote called "The Sermon and the Lunch" and he goes on to describe his own experience just the week before having lunch at the pastor's home. The pastor was rude and overbearing with his two adult children, interrupting and contradicting them rudely. The wife went on and on with some complicated story about how a neighbor had wronged her. CS Lewis wrote that, although her tale of woe went on for a long time, "we never learned how it began or how it ended. It was all middle." The daughter had whispered to him at church that morning, *'For God's sake stay to lunch if they ask you. It's always a little less frightful when there's a visitor.'* Which tells us that as uncomfortable as it was for a guest, things were worse when there weren't any visitors around.

The home is, as the pastor rightly said, where we can be ourselves. It is where we can fling aside the weary disguises and appear as we really are, and if what we really are is selfish, rude, whiny, domineering, or lazy, than what we really are undermines our Christian witness rather than validating it.

If our Christianity is genuine, it must affect and pervade our relationships at home. So after laying out Christian qualities like compassion and kindness and humility and forgiveness and love in vv. 12-17, it's like Paul comes over to your home and my home for lunch in vv. 18-21, and over a cup of coffee he unpacks how loving Jesus should affect our relationships in the home. Before we drop in to these verses specifically, I want to share two big principles that is important for us to keep in mind.

1. Imperfect reality is better than perfect phoniness

In CS Lewis' insightful article, he says what bothered him about the pastor's sermon wasn't that, as he put it, his practice was so different from his precept. Good advice is still good advice even if the person giving it isn't following it. Lewis' objection was that in the message the pastor didn't deal with the very real challenges and difficulties, or the very real temptations and problems that every home faces. Instead he described the home in sentimental terms as a magical place with no limit to its ability to produce happiness and virtue. The trouble wasn't that the pastor was being insincere. The trouble was that the pastor was being a fool. He was talking sentimental gibberish that had no connection with his own

¹ The Sermon and the Lunch, CS Lewis

experience of family life and no connection with reality. Imperfect reality is always better than perfect phoniness. So let's be real, brothers and sisters.

2. It is in the home that God does His deepest and truest work in us

The measure of how deeply God's grace is at work in us isn't how we treat people in church or at work, because there are social restraints and appearances that can make us strive to look like we're godly, loving Christians when really we just want to look good in people's eyes. In the privacy of our home we will say things to our spouse or children or parents or siblings that we would never say to someone outside the family. Where we listen politely and answer humbly and gently with someone we don't know well, we interrupt rudely or speak harshly to a family member. There are those who love being home precisely because they can truly be themselves, - they can be selfish, rude, slovenly, unkind - all the things they know they couldn't get away with outside the home.

Home isn't meant to be the place where we let our hair down completely and just let it all hang out. We need the tempering of the Holy Spirit on our hearts and thoughts and words no matter where we are, including home. Especially home. It's in the home that God does His deepest and truest work in us, because it's where He is dealing with who we really are, and not some image that we erect for public consumption.

If we aren't allowing the Lord to do His work really and truly in our hearts at home, we are in danger of becoming religious phonies. We say one thing publicly but live another thing privately. Without the rule of grace in our homes, many homes fall prey to what CS Lewis calls the "tyranny of the most selfish member". The tyranny of the most selfish member - whether it's a teenager who thinks the world revolves around them, or a husband who thinks that his wife and kids are there to serve his selfish desires - is a home whose atmosphere is dominated by a selfish, demanding, ego-centric person. People tiptoe around that member, always walking on eggshells. If you have ever lived under the tyranny of the most selfish member, you know what CS Lewis is talking about. If you are that most selfish member, then what you think is biblical order and peace in the home is really just everyone else accommodating your selfishness. If you want the Lord's work of grace in your life, you need to repent and humble yourself.

God's work in us will work on our selfish nature, replacing it with Christ's giving and loving nature. None of us will be perfect, we will always be a work in progress, but imperfect reality is always better than perfect phoniness.

In the following verses Paul lays out some "rules of conduct" that God's grace engraves on our hearts. Rules of conduct that help keep order and harmony in our closest relationships, our family. Rules that balance our closest relationships so that those relationships won't be subject to the tyranny of the most selfish member. Notice the balance:

- Wives, submit to your husbands...Husbands, love your wives...
- Children, obey your parents...Fathers do not provoke your children...
- Bondservants, obey...your earthly masters...masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly...

We're only going to get as far as husbands and wives this morning.

3. Wives are to submit, husbands are to love

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

Culturally, the way that wives and husbands relate to each other has changed a great deal from the days of Jesus, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. The fact is the way husbands and wives related to each other in Jesus' day was very different than it was in Abraham's day, when a lot of guys had several wives. The way that husbands and wives relate to each other (in general) today is different than how husbands and wives related to each other even just fifty years ago. Chances are, husbands and wives will relate to each other differently fifty years from now. There are cultural changes that are just that -cultural changes - that aren't right or wrong, they're just different. But the Bible tells us that there are timeless relational characteristics that God has built into creation that do not change. This verse, rightly understood, with its relational balance and harmony, won't ever not be true.

The Bible is very clear: in God's sight men and women are equal. There is no difference in our equality and no difference in our salvation. Men and women are equally valuable and equally precious in the sight of God. But there are some built in differences between men and women that have nothing to do with equality or value, but do affect how we relate to one another, and particularly how we relate to one another in marriage.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. There is a relational harmony here that strengthens and protects the marriage relationship. The word submission doesn't mean subjugation and slavery. It doesn't mean the wife checks her personality and her brains at the altar. The wife enters the marriage as a complete equal to her husband, with skills and opinions and intelligence and value to God that is equal to her husband in every way. So what does "submission" mean? The word "submit" is related to a military word that speaks of rank and leadership. John Piper defines submission as a wife honoring and affirming their husband's leadership and helping his leadership in the home be a success. Simply put, a wife grows bigger by affirming and strengthening her husband as a leader, not by usurping her husband's leadership. But many today might question whether that is even true: is the husband being the leader (hopefully a good leader) in the marriage a creation thing or a cultural thing?

The Bible says that it is part of our created order that men have a desire and responsibility to lead and care for their wives and wives desire a man who will provide protective and caring leadership to her. The primary function of the husband's leadership, rather than promote his own way, is to care for, protect, and nurture the wife to help her thrive as the woman God meant for her to be and for their marriage to reflect the love of Christ for the church and of the church for Christ (Eph. 5).

Now, I want to make a case for why this isn't a cultural thing, it's a creation thing. To do that, I want you to take a trip with me. We are going to be time traveling, going back to the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, to the last minutes of the RMS Titanic. We are all familiar with the story, but I want to focus on one particular aspect. As the ship foundered, the policy for filling the lifeboats was "women and children first". Men were honor bound to defer their seats on the lifeboats so that as many women and children as possible could be saved. There are touching cases of husbands waving goodbye to their wives from the deck of the sinking ship. We would never think of shaming these women for being torn from their

husbands in that tragic hour. But what if the roles were reversed? What if there were men who claimed the last seats on a lifeboat and made their wives stay behind on the sinking ship? That man would live in shame the rest of his days. I don't care what culture or age you're from, that just feels wrong deep inside. It isn't a cultural thing, it's a creation thing. There were a few wives who refused to leave their husbands and bravely chose to die alongside of them, but what would we think of the man if he said, "well, if you're not going to take that seat, honey, would you mind if I jumped in? No sense both of us going down with the ship." I don't care what culture you're from or what period of history, that goes against something deep inside of what God created us to be.

This has nothing to do with strength or intelligence or ability or value. It's a deep reflex inside a man to take the lead in protecting and caring for a woman, and the marriage is to be the pinnacle of that protection and care.

Here's how sin has twisted and distorted this code of conduct in the marriage. I'm going to begin with a sinful tendency in the man and God's remedy. The temptation for an insecure man is to use this verse to domineer his wife, to silence her opinions, to belittle her abilities, to demand that she agree and obey him in everything. What he thinks is God's design for marriage is actually just the tyranny of his selfishness. The temptation for the impatient man is to speak and deal harshly with his wife. There are guys who pride themselves on being rough around the edges, they say it like they mean it, they don't soft peddle anything. And guys, we can talk that way to each other. But God's word instructs us as men to watch our words with our wife - make sure the impact of our words is to build her up and protect her heart, not tear her down and make her feel unsafe.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them means that love requires us men to watch our words when speaking to our wives. Love requires us to watch our tone. I wish I could say that I've always built my wife up with my words and have never been harsh or torn her down, but that wouldn't be true. Probably every husband here has been guilty of that at some point, but we need to repent and ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with God's love for our wives recognizing that love will affect our words and our tone and our actions.

What does that love look like? In Eph. 5, Paul says the husband's love should take its cue from Jesus' love for the church. Jesus didn't come demanding we serve him, he came to serve us. He came to wash our feet, to die for our sins, to clean us and love us and make us his bride. He laid down his life so that we could be all that God meant for us to be. Our love should look like his love and that's the opposite of squelching and domineering her, it's laying our lives down to help them thrive and flourish and be all that God created them to be.

So here's my appeal to us as men: are we encouraging our wives to be all that God created them to be? Are we blessed by and proud of their strength, their wisdom, their leadership gifts, their insight, their initiative, and all the qualities that God has blessed them with or are we threatened by it (sad)? Do we want them to flourish and succeed in everything they put their hand to, even if it means they outshine us (think of Priscilla and Aquila)? Do we want them to feel safe and free under our loving protection and care? If the answer is no, if your wife, who once shone with confidence and freedom is now afraid of speaking her mind, afraid to contradict you, or do something without your permission, can I speak freely? Actually I'm going to whether you give me permission or not. You need to repent because you're on your

way to becoming a small man and a small leader. God's call to you is to be a loving husband and a bigger leader! If you see your wife's strength as a threat to your manhood and leadership, God's answer is for you to grow as a man, not shrink and shrivel your wife to make you feel better about yourself. Open up your life to a mature brother or two and ask for accountability - imperfect reality is better than perfect phoniness. Don't be a phony. Don't stay where you are. God wants to do a real and deep work in you by growing you through your relationship with your wife.

The temptation for many women will be to usurp and undermine their husband's leadership. Just as some men belittle their wives to feel bigger, some wives belittle their husbands and throw roadblocks up to his leadership to make themselves feel better. But they're hurting themselves and their marriage when they do that. Submit to your husband doesn't mean you don't share with him when you disagree with him. Or that you don't rebuke him when he's doing something stupid. We husbands need that! Men, we need our wives to be our first line of defense against our own stupidity! If a wife, in the name of submission, doesn't speak up when the husbands going off the rails or is doing something spiritually or emotionally or physically harmful, she is enabling him. But there is a way to do that in a way that is respectful and builds him up rather than tears him down.

But there are marriages - we've all seen them - where the wife loves being bossy and the weary husband has learned to say "yes dear" to everything, and lets his wife make all the decisions and he just hangs out watching tv and keeps the peace. His leadership and his manhood has been emasculated. Women, can I be truthful with you? And I'll be more gentle than I was with the guys, but while you may joke about how you've trained him to be what you want him to be, you're actually hurting him and yourself. As much as you may like having free rein to make all the decisions, you know it bothers you that your husband isn't decisive. It bothers you that he doesn't ever lead. You say, "but what if I'm naturally a better leader than my husband?" I think that's true in a lot of marriages - the wife is a naturally better leader than the husband. And there are going to be areas in all marriages where the wife is a better leader than the husband. There are ways that Janice is more gifted to take initiative and lead than I am. That doesn't threaten me - I am grateful for it. Our lives and home life is so much better because of Janice's strengths. Women, God isn't calling you to submerge your identity or deny how He has shaped and gifted you. Simply this: your success as a wife isn't measured by how small you can make your husband, but how much you can help him grow and succeed.

Even when a husband goes off the rails, there is a way to call him back to the truth and disobey his ungodly demands in a respectful way. This doesn't make you weak, in fact it displays an incredible strength.

The gospel is all about healthy relationships - beginning with our relationship with God, and flowing outward to our relationships with one another. The important truth we see in these verses, and we'll be looking at the parent/child relationship next week, but God's grace makes a claim on how our homes look. The genuine work of God must begin in the home with those closest to us.