

## CHRISTIAN HOUSES IN PAGAN CITIES (3:18—4:1)

<sup>18</sup> Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. <sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. <sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in every respect, for this is pleasing in the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not antagonize your children, lest they become disheartened. <sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey in every respect those who are your earthly masters, not only when they are watching, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work heartily, as to the Lord and not for men, <sup>24</sup> knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of inheritance. It is the Lord Messiah you are serving. <sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will receive back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. <sup>1</sup> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Lord-Master in heaven.

After the ethical admonitions of 3:1–17, Paul provides some further teaching in 3:18–4:1 about Christian households. This section does not seem to be linked to the teaching of the “philosophy” but comprises a general piece of exhortation about how to live as Christians in a pagan majority environment.<sup>1</sup> We do not know for certain how many Christian households there were in Colossae or the Lycus Valley. We know of at least two house churches in Colossae, operating under the benefaction of Philemon and his wife Apphia (Phlm 1–2), and another in Laodicea under the benefaction (and leadership?) of Nympha (Col 4:15; cf. other

1. Cf. in contrast MacDonald (2008: 160, 167), who sees the household code as opposed to the false teaching by reinforcing the Colossians’ identity as a spiritual body of believers.

women household heads such as Chloe in 1 Cor 1:11 and Phoebe in Rom 16:1–2). These instructions are addressed to them.

A “household” was more than a domestic dwelling but included the *pater familias* or “head of the house,” his wife, children, extended family, slaves, employees, retainers, and often other clientele like political supporters. The Christian household codes (*Haustafeln*) represent teaching addressed to the various members of a household (see Eph 5:22–33; 1 Pet 2:18–3:7; cf. 1 Tim 2:1–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2, 17–19; Titus 2:1–3:8; *Did.* 4:9–11; *Barn.* 19:5–7; 1 *Clem.* 1:3–2:1; 21:3–9). They are typified by listing members in binary pairs of husbands/wives, parents/children, and masters/slaves and then defining the mutual relations between the pairs usually in terms of obedience and submission. These codes are most likely derived from Aristotelean or Stoic ethical precepts for the governance of relationships within a household, which were subsequently appropriated by Hellenistic Jewish authors (e.g., Aristotle *Politics* 1.5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. rom.* 2.24–27; Seneca *Ep.* 94.1; and in Hellenistic Judaism, e.g., Philo *Hypoth.* 7.1–9; *Decal.* 165–67; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.190–219; Ps.-Phocylides 175–227). A key difference is that whereas the Stoics drew up their household management lists according to the “law of nature,” Paul’s are clearly patterned after the “law of Messiah” (Gal 6:2) and the “new nature” (Col 3:10).<sup>2</sup> Not everyone particularly likes the Christian household codes. Some feminist scholars regard them as patriarchal and oppressive and often posit “histories” as to how the egalitarian religion of Jesus and Paul was supplanted by the hierarchical and androgynous designs of post-Pauline disciples who wrote the household codes as a means of putting women in their place.<sup>3</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza states: “Colossians shows how a so-called ‘enthusiastic’ realized eschatological perspective can produce an insistence on patriarchal behaviour as well as an acceptance of the established political-social status quo of inequality and exploitation in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Schweizer regards them as a “paganizing” of Christian ethics, and Barclay stoically comments that, “for better or worse, the code represents a christianization of traditional rulings on household relationships.”<sup>5</sup>

2. Cf. Wright 1986: 147.

3. Cf. e.g. Tamez 2007.

4. Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 254.

5. Schweizer 1982: 217–20; Barclay 1997: 71.

Yet it must be recognized that Christian authors appropriated these well-known household codes probably for apologetic reasons and as a means of ensuring the commendable conduct of Christian homes before outsiders (see Col 4:5; 1 Thess 4:12).<sup>6</sup> The Christian household codes concern how the lordship of Jesus Christ over a community is to be lived out before the pagan world around them. While these codes are undoubtedly patriarchal, they express that patriarchy in light of mutual obligations of honor and love and clearly censure abuses of authority. They were a necessary way of stabilizing a para- or post-Jewish group that was regarded as religiously sectarian, politically subversive, and socially offensive to cultural elites and civic powers. The Colossian household code is not a reaffirmation of the status quo of pagan ethics, nor a mandate for social revolution, rather, it concerns the authority of the Lord over the household of faith and the mutual obligations that follow from the subordination of all authority under the Lord. In a nutshell, it is the application of the principle of 3:17 to all: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> Now how would Nympha of Laodicea have responded to this unit of text? Following MacDonald, I would say that her own position as household leader was afforded a degree of protection and respectability by this admonition. She would also, I suspect, have viewed such ethical teaching as obvious and prudent for the world of emerging Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

### HOUSEHOLD RELATIONS AMONG HUSBANDS, WIVES, AND CHILDREN (3:18–21)

Paul begins his exhortation about household relations with **Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord**. Wives are to willingly subject themselves to the authority of their husbands as such behavior is appropriate for a women living in the sphere of the Lord’s authority. But what actually makes such behavior **fitting** (*anēkō*) is a good question. Is it because it corresponds to the ordering of creation, with male first and woman born second (1 Tim 2:11–15); because of an analogy to Christ/male headship over the church/wives (1 Cor 11:3, 7–9; Eph 5:23–24); or

6. Balch 1981 and others, e.g., Keener 1992: 184–86; Dunn 1996: 251; Lincoln 2000: 653; Balla 2003: 176; MacDonald 2008: 161–62.

7. McL. Wilson 2005: 289.

8. MacDonald 2005: 115.

because it conforms to perceived cultural norms of appropriate marital relations?<sup>9</sup> We are left to guess. The obverse charge to the **Husbands** is to **love your wives** and **do not be harsh with them**. Love is the most supreme ingredient in Christian ethics for Paul (see 3:14).<sup>10</sup> What love in action means is best spelled out by reference to the parallel passage in Ephesians where husbands are commanded to “love your wives as Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). In addition, a further admonition upon husbands is to **not be harsh with her**, which is a clear command against brutish and abusive behavior towards wives.

The topic shifts from husbands/wives to parents/children. The children of the household are to **obey your parents in every respect**, and this pertains to all matters since parents, especially fathers and guardians, had legal rights over their children. The justification for this attitude is that it is **pleasing in the Lord**, which is a key motivation for the Christian life according to Paul (Rom 12:1–2; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:10; Phil 4:18; see esp. Col 1:10), and honoring one’s parents is commanded in the Decalogue (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; cf. Matt 15:4–5; 19:19). The command applied to fathers, **do not antagonize your children, lest they become disheartened**, mirrors the relation of husbands/wives where the call for submission is matched by a subsequent command for husbandly authority not to be abused. In regards to children, this means the specific avoidance of behavior that rouses anger and demoralizes rather than builds up.

### **HOUSEHOLD RELATIONS BETWEEN MASTERS AND SLAVES (3:22—4:1)**

The slave/master relationship is addressed next in the Colossians household code. Among the Colossian Christians relations between slaves and masters had not always been amicable as the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus shows. Paul affirms not the institution of slavery, which is simply assumed, but how it was to be lived out in Christian community (see “Paul and Slavery” in the introduction). The instructions here must be seen in light of 3:11; the authority of masters over slaves must be situated as part of a wider christological reality of unity in Christ. Unlike 1 Pet 2:18–25, the issue here is not about Christian slaves

9. Cf. Keener 1992: 139–83.

10. Cf. Bird 2008a: 146–48.

owned by non-Christians, but more probably Christian slaves (Christian sometimes by virtue of group conversion, e.g., Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31, 34; 18:8) within Christian households.<sup>11</sup> Paul calls on slaves to obey in all matters their earthly masters and he makes the point with a number of qualifications. First, they are to serve not only **when they are watching, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord**. The service rendered is not to be like that of a person constantly checking to see if their master is around so effort and work can be feigned at appropriate moments. Instead, it is to be genuine and sincere service. The accompanying attitude of **fearing the Lord** (see the LXX: Exod 1:17, 21; Lev 19:32; 25:17; Ps 54:20; and NT: 1 Pet 2:17; Rev 11:18; 14:7; 19:5) means reverent submission and obedience to his will. Fear of the Lord is also a mark of loving service to God (Deut 10:12–13) and a sign of God-centered wisdom (Ps 111:10; 112:1; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Sir 1:14–27; 19:20; 21:11). Second, they are to **work heartily, as to the Lord and not for men**. The phrase **work heartily** is literally “from the soul” (*ek psuchē*), or from the inner most fabric of one’s being. Slaves are not to work only when cornered like a rat in a trap, but without need of supervision and in a genuine spirit of obedience. What is done for earthly masters is really performed for the benefit of the **Lord Messiah** who is the ultimate object of their service. Further justification for such behavior is supplied by Paul in highlighting elements of reward and judgment. Slaves are to conduct themselves as such since they know that **from the Lord you will receive the reward of inheritance**. Slaves had no rights of inheritance unless their masters set them free, but for those who were born in slavery, lived in slavery, and would probably die in slavery, this promise of inheritance was good news. Their lack of honor and inherited possessions would be supplied by the Lord himself as their reward for service to him. But rewards are a two way street. As good behavior is rewarded with an inheritance, so also the **wrongdoer** receives back appropriate punishment for his aberrant ways. That is a principle rooted in the impartiality of God.

Then, as Paul does elsewhere, he again turns the focus from the submissive partner to the master: **Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven**. The masters are themselves slaves to the Lord in heaven and their service to him must be equally appropriate as that of slaves entrusted to their care and service.

11. Cf. Best 1998: 524; Balla 2003: 174.

Whereas Roman law recognized the inalienable legal right of the master over the slave, no such mandate exists in the Christian home, where it is not the rule of Roman law but the impartiality of God that is the final principle for determining what is good and what is wrong. As such, masters are to act in a just and fair manner towards slaves, or else they too risk the threat of punitive justice should they fail to appropriately manage their houses in a righteous way. For instance, whereas slaves were vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse by their masters, such activity is inappropriate in light of what Paul says in the Colossian vice lists related to sexual immorality (3:5). This goes to show that there is no mere light coating of Christianity applied to pagan household codes. The relations within the house exist under the auspices of their heavenly Lord, which affects the relational dynamics and ethical imperatives within that household. While we might think of justice for slaves as requiring their emancipation, in Paul's world that was probably unthinkable. But for slaves to hear their masters charged with acting justly towards them and even being threatened with chastisement for unjust behavior, that would have been comforting news. All in all, the Colossian household code is about ordering communal life according to the sovereign authority of the Lord and the wisdom required to live obediently in a pagan environment.