

## Introduction

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You have probably seen a bumper sticker that says “Question Authority.” That slogan is most often credited to the psychologist and professor Timothy Leary, who also popularized the saying that defined the 1960’s: “Tune in, turn on and drop out”. The expression has roots much earlier, however. Some people have pointed out that Benjamin Franklin was quoted as saying “it is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority” and centuries earlier Socrates said essentially the same thing. A review of websites associated with “Question Authority” (which I do not recommend reading) reveals that the authority that most people are questioning is ultimately God’s authority. Every sin is an instance of questioning – of doubting – the authority of God or doubting our delegated responsibility from God.

In the book of Colossians, we have seen a repeated emphasis on the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ over all things. In Colossians 1, He is the creator of all things and the preeminent one. In Colossians 2, He is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and the one who has cancelled our sin debt on the basis of His crucifixion. In Colossians 3, He is one who is now seated at the right hand of the Father and is coming back in glory, and in whose name we are to give thanks to God the Father in whatever we do, in word or deed.

His sovereignty and right to our obedience extends to all facets of our lives. Ultimately, Jesus Christ is the Master and Lord of every person He has redeemed. The apostle Paul tells us frankly in 1 Corinthians 6: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” The Lordship of Jesus Christ informs and energizes all of the authority relationships in which we participate, regardless of whether we are exercising authority or submitting to someone who is.

Today we will examine the implications of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the Christian home, in the relationships that most of us will experience at one point or another in our lives. In Colossians 3:18 – 4:1, the apostle Paul explains the ramifications of Christ’s authority in the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. Obviously none of us are masters or slaves in the traditional sense, but there are still lessons for us in Paul’s instructions.

It is far too easy to read Paul’s instructions from a modern, western perspective and fail to understand how dramatic his exhortation would have sounded to the original recipients of the letter. There is an honor and recognition of the worth of wives, children and servants that was unknown in the ancient world. The apostle Paul has already clarified that there are no distinctions in the body of Christ; all are in Him, all are connected to the Head, and all are involved in nourishing and knitting the body together, teaching and admonishing one another, giving thanks to God the Father through the Lord Jesus in whatever they do. This equality before God naturally raised the question of how their membership in the body of Christ impacts relationships in the home, which in the first century was dominated by the almost absolute rule of the father as head of the household. Does union with Christ eliminate all distinctions and roles? Which aspects of home life are changed and how? Paul asserts the ultimate Lordship of Christ over all roles. Our Lord Jesus redeems our submission and exercise of authority out from mere human tradition and into the will of God.

That is not an easy passage. It is challenging partly because of its brevity – it doesn't answer every question or cover unusual situations, but rather gives a very short instruction for each role that someone could play in a home in the first century Roman Empire. Because it is short, the preacher must answer some difficult questions about how much to say *in addition* to the text that is faithful *to* the text.

It is also challenging because it is – pardon the expression – so “close to home”. I am speaking directly to where many of you are living – literally – so this material is not merely academic. There are many challenging passages in the New Testament, but this is different. Unpacking what the apostle Paul means when he refers to “what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body” – easy. Working through his reference to “being baptized on behalf of the dead” is not a problem. Preaching about marriage and raising children – now there is a challenge!

Please stand while I read Colossians 3:18 to 4:1.

<sup>3:18</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 everything, for this pleases the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

<sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, <sup>24</sup> knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

<sup>4:1</sup> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

## Marriage

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The first authority relationship that the apostle Paul deals with is marriage.

### *Wives*

<sup>3:18</sup> Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Wives have the place of honor by being addressed first. While it is not unheard of in ancient household instructions to speak to the wives, treating wives as responsible persons, capable of making decisions about their actions and attitudes was a new idea in the ancient world, and one that we should not miss.

The simple statement “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” raises four questions:

- Who is *responsible* for submission?
- What does *submission* mean?
- To *whom* are wives to submit?
- What does Paul mean by “as is *fitting* in the Lord”?

**Who is responsible for submission?** As followers of Jesus Christ, Christian wives are to submit *themselves*; it is not the responsibility of the husband to cause his wife to submit to him. Whose job is it? It is the wife's responsibility. In Ephesians 5, Paul summarizes his instruction to wives this way: "*let the wife see that she respects her husband.*" (Ephesians 5:33) Dear married sisters; redeemed by the Lord, fellow heirs of the grace of life, (1 Peter 3:7) God's word instructs you to take responsibility for your attitude and action of submission to your husband. Dear married brothers, you have another duty that we will get to in a few moments; God does not hold you accountable for your wife's submission.

**What does submission mean?** What is the requirement? What does it look like? This is one area where the husbands may have one idea and the wives have another; let's make sure that we have a Biblical view of what submission entails. The Greek word behind "submit" in this verse is a form of *hypotasso*, which literally means "under arrange". It is a military term, acknowledging *rank* without considering *value*. I think it is helpful to associate it with the modern military command "fall in" which means "to take one's proper place in a military formation". Submission includes aligning yourself with someone else's goals and leadership. Here is a good description: "Submission includes ordering your life for the welfare of another, submitting to their direction, using your energy and resources to accomplish a shared goal." All of your creativity, gifts and abilities come into play in true Biblical submission.

**To whom are wives to submit?** The answer seems obvious; wives are to submit to their husbands, but even in that arrangement there is grace from the Lord. It is a little easier to see in the parallel passage in Ephesians 5: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Wives submit to *their* husbands, not all husbands. Amen? There is something to be grateful for! It does not mean that all women submit to all men, but it is in the context of an intimate, loving relationship that wives submit to husbands. There are of course other authority relationships in our lives; we are called to submit to one another in various ways, to elders, to the civil authorities and ultimately to Christ.

**What does Paul mean by "as is fitting in the Lord"?** The apostle Paul is basically saying that wives submitting to husbands under the ultimate authority of Christ is appropriate. This is not just an accommodation to first century culture. In the Lord – in the context of a Christian home – it is fitting and appropriate for a wife to submit to her husband. In Colossians 1, Paul said that in his prayers he is "asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" and Epaphras, who had alerted Paul to the situation in Colossae was also praying "that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." When there are difficult times in marriage – and there will be difficult times in marriage – it is especially important to be convinced that submission to authority – in all of the ways that God's word prescribes – is the will of God and not some outdated way of living. Is this easy? No – it is impossible aside from the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Complementarianism**

The view that we share on the distinct roles for men and women has the imposing name "complementarianism". It is derived from the fact that we "complement" one another; not like "you look nice today" (compliment) but complement, like complementary colors – they are different, but they go together. It is rooted in creation. The man, Adam, was created first and bears the responsibility to lead. The woman, Eve, was created second, but not second like "second place" but rather last – the crowning point of creation, the final master stroke of the entire creation! She was created because Adam needed a helper; the creation was not complete without her.

The short exhortation on wives in Colossians does not include any details on difficult situations like what the Bible calls being “unequally yoked” – for example if the wife is a believer and the husband is not – but that situation is dealt with in more detail in 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3. In addition, this passage does not give direction for a dangerous, abusive situation. If that is the case, please come to the elders or go to the civil authorities to get help. I pray that you will never need to consider that, but don’t struggle with doubt about the right thing to do if you are threatened.

### *Husbands*

<sup>3:19</sup> Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

This is another quietly revolutionary statement. In the first century world, husbands ruled their home and there was little thought about love. One ancient author commented that it was a nice circumstance if husbands loved their wives. Of course, this begs the question: what does it mean for husbands to love their wives?

The word for love used here is the selfless love that God demonstrates. It has all of the characteristics of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13:

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

The standard for husbands loving their wives is Christ Himself. The apostle Paul elaborates this point in the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:25: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her”.

Brothers, fellow husbands – love your wives! We have a high standard of self-less love as we seek to follow the example of our Lord Jesus, but we are commanded to love our wives this way. His grace is sufficient; His power is at work within us to glorify Himself in our household relationships through our godly submission to authority and exercise of authority.

In addition to the positive command of loving with Christ’s love, Paul requires husbands to not be harsh with their wives. Some translations say don’t be bitter toward your wife. Why the difference in wording? The word in the original text is actually bitter, like a bitter taste, but we know that bitter people tend to be bitter or harsh toward others. Why didn’t the wives get a command to not be bitter? The Lord knows that wives can be bitter, but perhaps there is a tendency in men, going all the way back to Adam, to blame our wives for our failures in leadership and to become bitter. God’s word commands us to stop doing that! Keep loving and don’t let yourself slide into bitterness and harsh behavior.

We have a tendency to see the speck in one another’s eyes and ignore the log in our own. A husband who has the wrong focus might think “Is my wife submitted to me? Does she respect me? Do I need to help her with that?” There is certainly room for godly instruction from the Word of God, but submission is the wife’s responsibility before God. Similarly, the wife might think “Does my husband have any clue what it means to love me as Christ loved the church? Do I need to give him some pointers on loving leadership?” That doesn’t work well either.

### *Questions*

Wives, does your husband know that you are on his team? Are you working toward the same goals? Is he confident that you are ready to bring all of your creativity, gifts and skills to magnify the Lord together? Do you see your submission as an act of devotion to the Lord Jesus?

Husbands, are you harsh with your wife? Do you need help with that? Which of the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13 do you need to work on first? Are you growing in sacrificing for your wife's ultimate needs?

### *Exemplified in the Lord Jesus*

Jesus was obviously not a wife, but He gave Himself in submission to the Father, to achieve the Father's will. A centurion recognized this in Jesus, saying "For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me." (Matthew 8:9) – he recognized that Jesus was in submission.

Jesus is the ultimate husband; he is the model of loving sacrifice for His bride, the church. Christ

"loved the church and gave himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:25-30)

## **Parenting**

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### *Children*

<sup>3:20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Children were little better than slaves in the ancient world, under the total control of their father, who even had the right of life or death of his children. The apostle Paul treats children as morally responsible and able to make decisions about their behavior to be pleasing to the Lord.

Children, you matter to God. He is interested in you and in your obedience. In a similar passage in Ephesians 6, Paul says "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." (Ephesians 6:1) It should be a comfort that it is right, and pleasing to the Lord, to obey your parents. It is not just because they are bigger than you are. God means it for your good, and the Ephesians passage links it to a promise: "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

The command to children to obey their parents is different from the command to wives to submit to their husbands. It is related word, which combines "under" with "hearing". This is obedience that does not require careful reflection and study before doing it. When you hear, obey.

Beyond the promise of a long life as a result of honoring father and mother, there is a spiritual dimension to training children to obey. J. C. Ryle wrote in *The Duties of Parents* some years ago:

"Teach them to obey while young, or else they will be fretting against God all their lives long, and wear themselves out with the vain idea of being independent of His control. ...

You must not wonder that men refuse to obey their Father which is in heaven, if you allow them, when children, to disobey their father who is upon earth.”

For many of us, though, the “in everything” part of “obey your parents in everything” is cause of concern. First of all, we need to realize that parents have authority over their children in all areas of life, not just their spirituality. In some cases, a child’s obedience has saved their life from an unseen danger. It is possible, however, that a parent may require that a child do something that violates God’s commands. In that case, children must obey their higher authority. Another exception is when a parent forbids a child to become a Christian; to repent of their sin and trust Christ. There is something more important than obedience and family unity. Jesus said that He would cause division “father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother” (Luke 12:53) because families will be divided in their response to Jesus and His Lordship.

### *Fathers*

<sup>3:21</sup> Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Note that the apostle Paul again breaks with tradition by not emphasizing the duty of fathers to rule their household with absolute authority. Given that tendency, Paul recognizes that fathers sometimes went too far in their discipline and broke the spirit of their children, not just their will. Parents can over-do it and cause their children to give up trying to please their parents. The text tells us that God is pleased with the simple obedience of children. Are you harder to please than God is? In the passage from Ephesians, it says “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Perhaps you grew up in a home where it didn’t matter how well you did, there was always something more your parents expected. “That was a good layup, son, but you were slow off the line.” “5 ‘A’s’ – that’s what we expect from you. Now let’s talk about that B+.” Don’t manage your home that way! Discipline, instruction and encouragement are all important.

Unfortunately, there is another way to get off track, and it is probably more common in our time and culture. Maybe as a father you aren’t too strict, you’re too lenient or worst of all, just not paying attention. It is far too easy to become consumed with hobbies, sports, and needs outside of your family and miss the ones that need your time and attention the most. Fathers, we need to engaged and present – in every sense of the word – with our families.

There are many pressures on fathers today; it is not trivial to provide for a family and men can become overwhelmed with “helpful” advice on pursuing excellence at work, being sensitive to the needs of your wife, being there for every event in your children’s lives and pursuing ministry opportunities at church, and ... it can be too much. Get the basics right – sacrificially love your wife, don’t be harsh with her, train your children, don’t cause them to give up hope – and trust the Lord in your godly exercise of authority with your children. You have a Father in heaven and He does not want you to give up hope either.

### *Questions*

Children are you careful to hear and obey your parents? Do you see obedience to your parents as a way of pleasing the Lord Jesus?

Fathers, are you attentive or are you disengaged? Is it clear to your family that the ultimate head of your home is Jesus Christ? Do you communicate to your children by your words and actions that your wife is your greatest earthly treasure and that disrespecting her is dishonoring to you?

*Exemplified in the Lord Jesus*

Our Lord Jesus was the ultimate obedient Son. He was absolutely dedicated to doing His Father's will. He said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38) and in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42)

Jesus was obedient that we who were disobedient might be spared the punishment that our sins deserved. He suffered the loss of fellowship with His Father and died to enable us to be adopted into the Father's family; to become Sons and fellow-heirs with Him; "in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Romans 8:29)

Jesus shows us the Father and reveals His character; "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) Our Lord Jesus and His Father never exasperate us; they never wrongly discipline us (Hebrews 12:7-11) and make sure that we are never tempted beyond what we are able to bear. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

## **Work**

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The third relationship that the apostle Paul addresses is that of slaves and masters. It is interesting to note that the ESV has "softened" the translation somewhat over time. Earlier editions of the ESV refer to "slaves" whereas the more recent one's use "bondservants" which is just vague enough to take the edge off of the reality that these were people who were owned by other people. The reality of slavery was a factor in the ancient world for many centuries. Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, spoke of a slave as a living tool, "an animate article of property"<sup>1</sup>. Slaves were outside the protection of Roman law. Based on the place in the Roman Empire, between 10% and 40% of the population were slaves.

For the most part, there were two types of slaves:

- Agricultural and industrial slaves, who were often prisoners of war or convicted criminals. This group matches the stereotype of the slaves rowing the Roman warship in the movie Ben-Hur.
- Domestic slaves, who were often skilled workmen. They were associated with the home, and that is why Paul includes them in this section on walking in Christ at home.

Was it really that common for people to own slaves? In a word, yes. One author commented that it was a sign of severe poverty not to own at least a few slaves. It wasn't unusual or unexpected. Some people sold themselves into slavery because they could not repay their debts. Unlike the slavery of the American south, slaves could have any skin color or be from any part of the Roman Empire. Many domestic slaves, although certainly not all, eventually gained their freedom. Even that wasn't as good as we might think.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Aristot.%20Pol.%201.1253b&lang=original>

Slaves usually ate because their master needed them to be strong and work; no one was committed to feeding a freedman.

In response to Paul's exhortation to slaves, people often have one of two wrong responses – they either write off these verses because they seem irrelevant to modern life, or they simply change the relationship to that of employer and employee. Understanding the instructions to slaves and masters in its original context helps us see the current application.

Paul addresses the slaves as morally responsible people; people that mattered to God. Instead of stumbling over the condition of slavery and wondering why the scriptures don't promote revolt and upheaval, we need to see the marvelous grace of God operating against the backdrop of human injustice. Paul revealed to the slaves that they could be full citizens of heaven in spite of their status as slaves. They didn't have to wait to be a "real" Christian until they attained their freedom. We can be reconciled to God and be used by God in any life circumstance, even something as difficult as slavery. Paul articulated the principle in 1 Corinthians 7:

Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. (1 Corinthians 7:20-24)

This is marvelously freeing, and it applies to all of our situations. If you are single, your life is not "on hold" until you get married. If you are married, serve Christ in your marriage. Do you have small children at home with lots of needs? You are doing God's will as you raise them faithfully. If you are a child, you don't have to wait until you grow up to be a Christian, you can turn to Christ and serve Him now in whatever way you can. Your occupation and life circumstances don't matter – you can serve God and be satisfied in Him no matter what.

### *Slaves*

<sup>3:22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, <sup>24</sup> knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Paul first reminds the slaves that the master they serve is only a temporary one, and that they ultimately serve the Lord Jesus Christ. They are to serve not just when the earthly master is watching, but all of the time because their heavenly master is always watching, and He alone is worthy of their best effort. They are to work literally "from the soul" as though their Master is Christ – and in fact He is!

Their work, and ours, has a bearing on the reception of the gospel. Consider your employment or work at home in light of another of Paul's exhortations to slaves in 1 Timothy 6:



“Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.” (1 Timothy 6:1, 2)

The way that we honor and respect our employer – or don’t – has eternal implications.

Paul urges slaves to work hard remembering that they have an inheritance in the Lord. We cannot easily grasp what the promise of an inheritance meant to the slaves. As slaves, they had no right to an inheritance, but they received the guarantee of an inheritance in Christ. Think back to the prayer of the apostle Paul in chapter 1 from the perspective of a slave: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (Colossians 1:11, 12) Here, he repeats the promise of an inheritance and assures them that they will receive it from the Lord, the one that they ultimately serve.

Paul reminds us all that the Lord has no regard for earthly status: “For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.” God does not favor the rich or the poor, the master or the slave; he judges righteously. That is a very appropriate transition to his instruction for masters.

#### *Masters*

<sup>4:1</sup> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Each person in a position of delegated authority – husbands, parents, fathers, and masters – is given a limitation, a restraint on their authority, and here it is accompanied by a reminder that they themselves are slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul reminds all of us that we are not our own, for we were bought with a price. Did you know that when the Bible speaks of our redemption, it is about our being purchased out of the slave market of sin? Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” In Revelation 5, the redeemed worship the Lamb, saying “you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”. No matter what authority we have on earth, we all serve one Master in heaven.

#### *Questions*

All who work – and not necessarily for wages – does your work reflect your best effort? Is your soul in it?

Those who manage or oversee others, are you just and fair? Are you impartial, or is it obvious that you have favorites? Is it clear that you have a Master in heaven?

#### *Exemplified in the Lord Jesus*

Our Lord Jesus, the preeminent one, the creator of everything in the universe that was created, chose to become a man. Philippians 2 reminds us that He took on the form of a slave to redeem us from our

slavery to sin. He submitted Himself to abuse and mistreatment that we might escape the just punishment for our sins and be with Him forever. He bought our inheritance for us.

Jesus is the ultimate just and fair master. He bought us with a price and we are His! He is impartial in His rewards and in His correction. “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.” (Revelation 22:12)

## **Conclusion**

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We who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ have acknowledged His lordship over every aspect of our lives, and have been rescued from the inevitable result of questioning his authority.

God has established human authorities in our lives. None of them is perfect; they will all fail to exercise their authority appropriately in one way or another. We are not accountable to God for the ways in which the authorities over us fail; we are only responsible for our own submission and attitude. Submitting to God-ordained authorities is right and fitting; view it as an important aspect of your devotion to the Lord Jesus.

Many of us have delegated authority from God in our home and work relationships. Strive to glorify God in the way that you carry out your authority; be a blessing and not a cause for stumbling to those God has placed under your authority. Be attentive and do not hesitate to use your authority for their good.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ informs and energizes all of the authority relationships in which we participate, regardless of whether we are exercising authority or submitting to someone who is. Jesus is the ultimate model of submission and of the righteous and appropriate use of authority.