

Renew Relationships

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[0 : 00] Would you please stand for the arrival of the bridal party?

She's coming down the aisle and the eyes turn to gaze and to glimpse her dress.

Yes, here comes the bride all dressed in white. And what a stunning dress. Everyone's poking their heads out into the aisle with their cameras, taking a photo of the bride walking down the aisle.

All attention is on what she wears. There's far less attention on the vows. In fact, often people don't pay attention to that part of the service at all.

And in the vows gone are the days of love, cherish and obey. Unless Elisa's going to reinstate the tradition early next year.

[1 : 08] So, it's a rare bride these days who's prepared to make a marriage vow that differs in any way from the grooms.

So, she won't say obey. And in my experience, won't even say love, honour and cherish unless he is saying exactly the same words.

Love, honour and cherish. And gone are the days of this passage, at least verses 18 and 19, as being part of the Bible reading at the wedding.

Or it's Ephesians counterpart in Ephesians 5. And though Colossians 3 is frequently read at weddings that I take, usually I'm asked to stop at verse 17.

In today's hot climate, these words, in verses 18 and 19 in particular, are incendiary.

[2 : 13] They are fires that, they ignite fires that almost require a royal commission. And that's sad, I think. Yes, these words are strikingly counter-cultural.

They do not fit in the society in which we live. But if you look at the state of marriage and family life in our society, it's hard to be convinced that they've got it any better.

It's also sad because these are words that are frequently misinterpreted, misapplied or abused. Sometimes, for example, by domineering husbands demanding submission.

But maybe these old biblical words still speak after all.

So let's pray. God, your word is light and life. It is to make us wise for salvation in Christ.

[3 : 22] To teach us, correct us, rebuke us and train us in righteousness for every good work. Lord God, we pray that your word will dwell in our hearts richly, renewing us more and more in the image of your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. All eyes are on the dress. But as we saw last week, there are more important clothes than the dresses, the shirts, the trousers and coats that we're wearing tonight.

The context is so important in this passage, as indeed it usually is, reading the Bible. It is because you are in Christ, who has been raised and ascended to God's right hand above, that we are to wear now the clothes that belong above.

Our eyes are to be fixed on him, wearing in fact his clothes, as we saw last week. The clothes of verse 12, kindness, compassion, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and above all these things and over all these things, love.

They're the clothes of Christ we saw last week, and they are the clothes that we are to wear. We are to dress for heaven now, because we are already in heaven in Christ, where he is seated at God's right hand in glory.

[5 : 03] We saw in effect that those attitudes of verse 12, the kindness, compassion, humility, etc., are like the underwear, the attitudes that are inside and in one sense unseen, apart from their expression in action, like forbearing and forgiving in verse 13, and then over it all, like the coat that goes over the top, is love.

But Paul does not leave that exhortation of what to wear in the abstract. He anchors it in relationships. And we've seen over the last two weeks, with the clothes that we're to take off, that are things that fracture fellowship and break relationships.

And we saw it last week with those attitudes and aspects that are actually building relationships and building peaceable unity under Christ. So now he anchors it even more concretely in specific examples of relationships in which many of us find ourselves.

This is where the rubber hits the road, in effect. This is where the clothes of Christ are work clothes. The general principle in effect for tonight's passage came at the end of last week's, verse 17.

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 34] And there's no real paragraph break. It flows straight on. It's an artificial break in our English translations, in effect. And so that principle, with the clothing of Christ that's been spelt out in that paragraph, is now applied in three sets of relationships.

Within marriage, parents and children, and in this context, slaves and masters or in work. What do Christ's clothes look like on a bride?

Not a white dress, but verse 18. Be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

That's what the clothes of Christ look like for a bride, for a wife of a husband. Note that the wife is to submit.

Later on, children are to obey and slaves are to obey. The wife is to submit. Submission is a broader idea than obedience.

[7 : 51] Obedience is a subset of submission. Obedience carries with it the expectation that there are commands to obey or orders to obey.

But submission is broader than that. This is a voluntary submission. It's not necessarily in response to orders or commands, but rather simply to another person in general.

Notice too, when we get to the husband, there's no expectation that he demands submission or enforces submission. Not at all.

In some ways, submission as an idea is less authoritarian than the idea of obedience. Submission is an act of humility.

A voluntary act of humility. Humility was part of the clothing of Christ back in verse 12. Here it is being worked out in practice, in action, within marriage.

[8 : 55] Putting another's interests first. Submitting to another person's desires, intentions, goals or aims.

It's not dependent on the husband loving, which comes in the next verse. It's not a sort of barter or brokerage system.

Well, I'll submit so long as you love. But nonetheless, in the pairing of these two instructions, there is an expectation of mutuality. Paul is describing, in a sense, the ideal.

He's describing what wearing Christ's clothes look like. Just as, in effect, the previous paragraph described the ideal of the peace of Christ dwelling in the midst of people, in their hearts, and so on.

We are to strive for that ideal. So there is a mutuality between submission and love. Not that, in a sense, they're totally dependent on each other, but in the description of what Christ's clothes look like in marriage, both ought to be evident.

[10 : 03] This is a particular application, as I say, of verse 17. Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Because the end of the verse is, as is fitting in the Lord.

Paul, in fact, has written this whole letter to describe and urge and exhort that lives are worthy of the Lord, pleasing to the Lord.

We saw that back in chapter 1, to which every week we go back to that prayer. Paul was praying for the Colossians so that they may lead lives fully pleasing to God.

In effect, that's being echoed in these words here at the end of verse 18. As is fitting in the Lord. That is, this is Christ's clothes that are being demonstrated by the wife.

As I say, submission is Christ-like clothing in action. It's not culturally limited by this ancient patriarchal society.

[11 : 11] God's word is not bound by culture. It may be reflective of a culture. It speaks into a particular culture, but it's not bound by that culture.

We can't say, well, we live in a different, non-patriarchal society, therefore these words no longer apply. This is Christ's clothing. It transcends culture, in a sense, though it's addressed into a particular culture here.

But rather, the wife who is Christ-honoring, godly and loving, will submit to her husband. Maybe the emphasis here, in this instruction, is because wives in general were susceptible to not being submissive.

Notice, as I hinted at, there is no explicit mention of the authority of the husband over the wife. As I said, in fact, submission is a broader category than obedience, which suggests orders that are given and therefore a higher sort of concentrational focus on authority.

And though it's not in this passage, in its counterpart in Ephesians 5, it's prefaced by mutual submission. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

[12 : 35] And then comes the example first of wives to husbands. So it's not exclusively the wife submitting to the husband, it seems, in the big biblical pattern. How then, can a wife submit?

I suspect that's not easy in this day and age in particular. How can a wife submit? By focusing on Christ above.

That's what Paul exhorted at the beginning of this chapter. If you've been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated and not the things on earth.

That's how a wife can submit. By seeking Christ above. Christ, the great submitter. The one who submitted himself even to ungodly and unjust hands that brought about his death.

What an astonishing act of submission that was. For a wife to submit to a husband, seek Christ above.

[13 : 48] What do Christ's clothes look like on a Christian husband? Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

There is nothing in ancient Greek, Roman or Jewish codes of conduct that matches this. There are things that match or come close to the previous verse, but not this.

Husbands are commanded to love their wives. Their wife is not a chattel, not a piece of property, not an object to boss around, but a person to love.

And again, the clothing of Christ is being drawn into practice here. Above all, Paul said in verse 14, put on love.

And for a husband, that will mean loving your wife. Paul doesn't mean that wives are not to love their husbands, but maybe husbands were in particular susceptible to not loving their wives.

[14 : 58] And hence it's addressed in this verse. And, part of the context of verse 12 that we saw last week. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, loved of God, put on love for a husband that means love your wife.

That is, in a sense, it generates out of the love that Christ has for you. As a Christian, and in this particular example, as a husband.

Love will mean don't treat your wife harshly. Of course, love will mean a whole range of other things as well. The one example Paul picks out by way of a negative contrast is don't treat your wife harshly.

Don't embitter her. Maybe that was a typical way that men behaved in this context and society. And so, this is a specific correction to a susceptibly wrong behavior.

Husbands, love your wives and do not treat them harshly. So, what Paul envisages here in the clothing of Christ that's being demonstrated in action and behavior will be a gentle, tender love.

[16 : 22] It's very demanding. It's no less demanding on the husband than it is for the wife. And in a sense, all love is actually submissive. All love is putting another person's interests first.

All love is forgiving and forbearing, as we saw last week in verse 13. All love will be kind and compassionate and humble. So, this is quite a radical command to a husband.

The wife submits to the husband, the husband loves the wife, and that is the ideal where Christ's clothing is fully worn and fits.

Both actions are radically other person centered. So, how can a husband love his wife? By focusing on Christ above.

Seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. If you're a husband struggling to love your wife, seek Christ above.

[17 : 32] Just like if you're a wife struggling to submit to your husband, seek Christ above. For the husband, it's Christ the great lover.

Christ the one who loved the church so much that he gave his life for the church. Paul draws out that analogy more fully in Ephesians 5, but that's the same Christ that is to be focused on by the husband.

The Christ whose love was expressed in self-giving even to death. love. That's the sort of love that is the clothing of Christ on a husband.

It's a high demand. Seek Christ above. It's very different from our world, isn't it? Very different from the role models we expect, from the brutish Australian bloke that seems to be so typically caricatured in our society, a sacrificial, costly, willing love and submission for the benefit of the other.

There's no sense here of demanding rights, I demand your submission, nor on the other hand, I demand your love, but rather more accepting obligations and responsibilities to submit and to love because of Jesus, the great submitter, the great lover.

[18 : 56] Seek Christ who is above. You see, marriage models the gospel, marriage models Jesus Christ, marriage wears the clothes of Christ.

So for those of you preparing to be married, Chris and Elisa and Brenton and maybe others, this is demanding stuff. The vows that you will make, ideally, you will keep and this is the strength and length to which they go.

And for those who are already married, are you keeping your vows that reflect these clothes of Christ? Very demanding.

And if you're struggling with it, seek Christ above. It's astonishing that Paul addresses children. In the family laws of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, again, this was virtually unheard of.

In Ephesians, the children seem to be young because the counterpoint in addressing the parents or the fathers is to train them up and grow them and teach them, suggesting that the children are young.

[20 : 11] Here we don't have explicitly that context. It's hard to therefore be certain about, well, how old are you if you're still a child? I mean, I'm still a child of my mother in a sense, and maybe many of you older than I have got parents still alive.

So are we addressed by that? Don't be too dogmatic. And in some ways it's the wrong question. In some ways if we're trying to look for an out from this demand, then maybe actually we've got to reconsider.

But probably in the sort of extended households, you would have adult children still living under the care or patronage of their parents in some way. Maybe that's the general context here.

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Children are to obey, stronger and more focused than submit.

Notice too that as with the wives, their submission is fitting in the Lord. The children's obedience is their acceptable duty in the Lord. Paul, throughout these instructions, keeps taking them back to Christ, back to the Lord, back to Jesus Christ.

[21 : 33] The implication here, it's not your acceptable duty to the Lord, but your acceptable duty in the Lord. Lord. Now, if we want to push that a little bit, Paul is, I think, in that language assuming that children are in the Lord.

And he is certainly dealing with young children as well as potentially adult children. That's quite a radical idea for some, perhaps, that our little children of Christian parents, that's the context here, he's not talking about society in general, but the Christian community, that the little children, even, of Christian parents, he regards as, perhaps, I think, in the Lord.

And their obedience to their Christian parents is in the Lord. Again, recognize that Paul is describing, in a sense, what Christ's clothes will look like fully worn.

He's not dealing with sort of ambivalent or halfway measures. He's not dealing with the situation of non-Christian parents or where one parent may not be a Christian and do you obey them in everything, etc.

That's not really the situation that Paul's speaking of here. But rather he's speaking, well, what will Christ's clothes look like in practice? What will doing everything in the name of the Lord look like in practice?

[22 : 54] For children of Christian parents, you will obey them in everything, for that is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Obedience is Christ-like clothing for children.

How can a child submit? Some of you here are children, still not yet legally adults, but even for those who are still adults, maybe still living with your parents.

How do you obey? Not always easy. By seeking Christ above. By seeking Christ above.

The great obeyer who learned obedience even to death on a cross. As an adult, in his thirties, obeying his father even to death.

Paul goes on to address fathers. The word in some contexts could include all parents, although it's a male word, but it is used explicitly in some places to include mothers and fathers, but Paul used a different word from what he's just used.

[24 : 14] When it's children obey your parents, it's now a different word and probably it's fathers only in the context, but maybe not quite so defined. And here again is love at work.

Fathers, do not provoke your children or they may lose heart. It's a negative command here, not simply a positive one. Do not provoke your children.

That is, do not provoke them to bitterness, rebellion, discouragement. Do not act in a way that will drive them away to be rebellious children.

Maybe part of the context of this is found in the book of Deuteronomy. There, there is the concern about rebellious and stubborn children. If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of the town at the gate of that place, and in the end will be stoned.

Now, Paul is not explicitly going back to that verse, but he's urging fathers caution to make sure that their action does not provoke to rebellion and anger or bitterness their son or their daughter.

[25 : 34] notice there that it's not simply what the father is to do, but the father is to keep in mind the reaction of the child.

It's for the sake of the child, the son or the daughter, that the father is to act in this, in effect, loving way. It's a very high responsibility, isn't it, for Christian fathers?

It's quite a responsibility because there is an element of you carry the responsibility for how your children react to a degree. What a model of life it is to commend Jesus to your child.

It's an awesome responsibility, I think. So here, in effect, is meekness, compassion, kindness, humility, and patience being demonstrated in action by a father.

Here are the clothes of verse 12 in practice for the benefit of a son or of a daughter. How can a father act with such love and care?

[26 : 42] How can a father act with such restraint that he doesn't provoke their child so that they may lose heart? Hopefully, you've worked out the answer by now.

By seeking Christ above. Seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God the father. That is, seek the Christ who is meek, patient, kind, compassionate, and humble.

Even though it cost him a lot, Christ is the model for the father. father. It seems that this letter that Paul wrote to the Colossian church was taken by hand from Rome, where Paul was, to Colossae, most likely.

And in Colossae, it seems, lived a man called Philemon. His slave, called Onesimus, had run away. Now converted, Onesimus, the slave, was going back to his master, Philemon.

And this letter to the Colossian church, it seems, is accompanying Onesimus on his journey back from Rome to Colossae, to his master, back to slavery.

[28 : 00] Perhaps, indeed, at this time, some reckon that maybe even up to half the Roman Empire were slaves, technically. Now, when we think of slaves, we often think of Uncle Tom's Cabin and chain gangs of black American slaves or Afro-American slaves of the 19th century, brutally treated and terribly despised.

Maybe there were some cases like that in the Roman Empire, but many slaves were well educated, were actually, in a sense, more similar to being an employee than to being like a slave on chains.

Paul addresses slaves and masters at length. not simply a verse for each. And maybe the reason why in this letter he gives a bit more attention to that could be because everybody has a master-slave relationship in those days, and because Onesimus is arriving back, the runaway slave now converted, coming back to his master.

Like children, slaves are to obey, the beginning of verse 22. Obey your earthly masters in everything. We need to point out that the New Testament does not endorse slavery, but it addresses it.

It addresses it as an institution in its society. But notice Paul's subtle subversion of it here. Slaves, obey your earthly masters.

[29 : 34] masters. He could just as easily have said, obey your masters, and people would know what he meant. Obey your earthly masters places a limitation, a bit subversive in a way, on the human masters of slaves.

They are not the absolute masters of a human slave. They are merely the earthly masters. Paul in a sense is limiting by way of adding in the word earthly.

Well, in what manner were they to obey? They were not to be people pleasers. So verse 22 goes on, they are to obey in everything, not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly fearing the Lord.

Now for those of you who work in a job, there will be days, no doubt, when you are tempted to be pretty lazy and idle. And if you see or hear the boss coming out of his office or walking down the corridor, the screen goes blank, the pen comes out, and you are busy writing again, so that you are seen to be working hard.

But as soon as the boss is away or out for a meeting, well, out comes the chat with the other workers, and game of cards, more coffee, whatever it is. Paul says, don't just pretend, work hard, even when you are not seen by your earthly master, work wholeheartedly, he says, the end of verse 22, fearing the master, the Lord.

[31 : 17] It's a play on words between master and Lord through these verses that our English translation doesn't quite capture. whatever your task, verse 23, put yourselves into it as done for the Lord and not for your masters.

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, that is, with your soul is in a sense what's behind all that. In a sense, your heart and soul are being suggested by the language of verse 22 and 23.

Wholeheartedly and put your soul into it. Soul and heart are used in a sense synonymously here, but it's talking about what's coming out from the insides of us. It's not just a veneer of working hard just so that you can please your earthly master, but rather and above and over and above that, fearing the Lord, fearing Jesus, your heavenly master.

How do you work? Do you work in your office or in your job, doing the minimal like so many do? Or are you doing it fearing the Lord?

in a sense we could apply this across the board, whether or not you're being paid for your employment in your studies or voluntary work or whatever it is.

[32 : 34] Are you working, fearing the Lord? Because that's the motivation for a worker, for a slave, or an employee even in today's terms.

Fearing the Lord at the end of verse 22. 22, the end of verse 23, as done for the Lord and not for your masters. That's quite a radical way of thinking about our work.

Many people work in areas of work that are fairly mundane or boring or lacking some consequence perhaps. Maybe you're like that. Are you working for the Lord?

Are you doing it as if for him? Answering phone calls for clients or whatever it is. See, here's a practical application again of verse 17.

Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord. And here it is for an employee or a slave as they were called then. And then the other part of the motivation is verse 24.

- [33 : 34] Since you know that from the Lord, that is not your earthly master or earthly Lord, but from Jesus, you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

You serve the Lord Christ. Maybe hard to think about if you're working in a KFC shop, you've got a casual job at Meijer, or if you're operating at a call centre, you're sweeping floors, if you're a nurse in a hospital or even a doctor, or a physiotherapist or whatever.

Are you serving the Lord? is your work for the Lord. We're to be Lord fearers and not earthly master pleases, for Christ is our real master.

You serve the Lord Christ. And again, how subversive that actually is. Paul doesn't actually overthrow the human institution of slavery, but he transforms it in these words.

You are really serving the Lord Christ. What a liberating way to think about your work, especially if you struggle to be active and concentrating in it. Onesimus was a wrongdoer.

- [34 : 55] And Paul describes that in the letter to Philemon, which comes a little bit later in the New Testament. He says there that if Onesimus has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

In verse 25 here in Colossians 3, Paul says, for the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he's been done. There is no partiality.

If Onesimus arrives back in Colossae, in effect in the company of the people who carry this letter, there may well be a suggestion for other slaves, hey, this guy's run away and he's come back, he's been treated fairly, he's not been beaten for having run away, he's been a wrongdoer.

And if he did wrong Philemon in any way, Paul's going to pay for it. Hey, come on guys, let's see if we can run away. No, Paul says, the wrongdoer will be paid back.

Yes, Onesimus has been shown mercy, but you cannot presume upon such mercy. It's a warning for other slaves not to do likewise, as Onesimus had done.

- [36 : 07] Although we don't have the institution of slavery in our country, there is still slavery, of course, around the world in different places, many different places. It seems to me a fair application to say this applies to employees, whether or not we're paid, in fact.

Because actually, Paul is on about how do you view work. And this context, in a sense, doesn't depend upon a sort of slave ownership relationship.

Working for the Lord, seeking to please the Lord over and above your employee or anyone else, still applies outside the institution of slavery. And in our society, laziness in the workplace is commonplace.

It's why we identify, I think, so often with TV programs like The Office or the Bristow cartoon in The Age every day. So how can a slave, how can an employee, how can you in your work work hard, like Paul explains, by seeking Christ above, who is at the right hand of God, the one who laboured hard for his heavenly father, who laboured always.

seek Christ above. Well, finally, to complete the third pair of relationships, Paul briefly addresses masters at the beginning of chapter 4.

- [37 : 34] Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a master in heaven. It's remarkable in its demands.

The master may well think, I've got complete rights over my slave. But here again is the clothing of Christ being demanded. Here again is to be kindness, compassion, love and humility in treating a slave justly and fairly.

And though the words are different from the list of attitudes of verse 12, they fit together neatly. justice and fairness will be exercised by people who love, people who are kind, patient, forgiving and forbearing.

The clothes of Christ will look like justice and fairness for the employer or the master. master. But again, notice the subversive hint here.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a master in heaven. The word is Lord in both cases. That is, you masters, you are not absolutely in charge, for you are under a greater master, a heavenly master.

[38 : 59] So how is this Christian employer or master going to act with justice and fairness? By seeking the master in heaven.

By seeking Christ above, who is seated at the right hand of God in heaven. The master who is the servant king, whose yoke is easy, the good shepherd who lays down his life even for sheep.

The summary action is verse 17. Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Wives, act this way in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Husbands, act this way in the name of the Lord Jesus. Children, obey in the name of the Lord Jesus. Fathers, treat your children properly in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Slaves, do your work in the name of the Lord Jesus. And masters, treat your slaves in the name of the Lord Jesus. And the clothing for this action, the clothing for the wives and the husbands, the clothing for the children and the fathers, the slaves and the masters, is the clothing of Christ.

[40 : 08] The clothing of verse 12. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. That clothing demonstrated in forbearance and forgiveness and crowned with love.

The energy and power for accomplishing what is demanded here comes from Christ. From the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. From seeking Christ who is above at the right hand of God in heaven.

All these pairs, these three pairs that we've looked at tonight in nine verses, seven times Christ is explicitly drawn to their and our attention.

The wives are to act fitting in the Lord. The children are to obey. That's your acceptable duty in the Lord and so on. All the time looking to the Lord. All the time looking to Jesus and where is he?

Above. Seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Where are we? We're in him. We belong there. We're up there with him. We are to wear the clothes of heaven now.

[41 : 13] And it will look like this. In marriage. In family life. And in work life. As well. Paul said back in verse 10.

Clothe yourselves with a new self. Which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. And that will be demonstrated in renewed relationships between wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters.

Clothed in Christ's clothes. Brothers and sisters. Whether you're a father or not. A child or not.

A wife or husband or not. A slave or master or not. Whatever you do. In word or deed. Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Giving thanks to God the Father. Through him. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.