

Colossians 3:18 - 4:18

By Rick Mathews for Hillcrest Bible Church Adult Sunday School, April 5th 2020

Introduction

This lesson concludes the overview of Paul's letter to the Colossians with a continuation of the application portion of the epistle. The passage can be divided into three sections:

1. Responsibilities in the Home and on the Job, covering wives, husbands, children, parents, employees, and employers.
2. Our Testimony to the World, covering prayer and practices that contribute to our testimony.
3. People God Uses, about Paul's messengers and companions, each of whom have something to teach us.

In addition, at the end of the lesson proper you will find an optional appendix speaking to the completeness and reliability of your Bible, prompted by topics raised by certain verses in this passage.

3:18 to 4:1--Responsibilities in the Home and on the Job

Wives: Why is it difficult to submit to your husband?

1. He makes mistakes, so you tend to fear for the welfare of yourself and your family. As the antidote to fear, the godly woman ultimately depends upon Jesus Christ to care for herself and her family.
2. You have a tendency to want to be the leader. This has been the case since Adam and Eve rebelled against God in Eden. In Genesis 3:16 God said to Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." The meaning of "desire" in this verse is found in Genesis 4:7, where God is talking to Cain and uses the same phrasing: "Sin lies at the door, and its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." The "desire" in Genesis 4 is the desire for mastery, and is the same in Genesis 3. So a wife is always battling the desire to lead. Maybe you could do it better, but that responsibility is laid by God Himself on your husband. The only way to beat this tendency and be able to submit joyfully to your husband is to first submit to Jesus Christ and desire above all to please Him. The key to that is to build your relationship with Jesus through the word, prayer, and fellowship, that He might accomplish these things through you. Thus you will fulfill 1 Peter 3:6--"As Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror."

Husbands: The word "love" here in the original is the one for self-sacrificial love, putting your wife's interests (and those of your family) first, before your own interests and hobbies. Your standard is Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for His own. Why is this difficult?

1. We are selfish, and have a tendency to want to put our own interests and hobbies first.
2. We are lazy, and have a tendency to abdicate our responsibility, putting the burden of leadership on our wife.

Note you are not given the *right* to dominate, but the *responsibility* to lead. Since decisions are ultimately your responsibility, then you better be right. If you are wise you will seek your wife's input. She tends to see details you might have missed. You will also encourage her growth in Christ that she may joyfully fulfill the responsibility God has given to her. And don't forget the exhortation of I Peter 3:7 to dwell with her "with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life." She has a different role, but she is your equal before God. She is to be protected, valued, and honored.

How can you possibly do these things? Only by depending upon Jesus Christ, and building your relationship with Him through the word, prayer, and fellowship, that He might accomplish these things through you.

So we see that the God-given responsibilities in marriage are humanly impossible, driving both husband and wife to Jesus Christ for enablement. And they find that when they each grow closer to Him, they grow closer to each other.

Children: Their primary responsibility is to obey their parents. You know the Bible says they are not inherently good, so they need restraint and guidance until they are mature.

- To provide this restraint and guidance is the greatest sign of a parent's love.
- Conversely, to let children do as they please is the most harmful thing that can be done to them.

Parents: Note fathers are addressed. He is to set the standards and tone and ensure consistency, but again he should get input from his wife, for she is often on the front lines. She should have his support.

- Those standards are not to be unreasonable or arbitrary, lest the children become discouraged and hopeless, perhaps resulting in an inability to deal with life later on.
- Don't forget to show them affection. You are a father, not a drill sergeant.

Employees: If this applied to bondslaves, it certainly applies to free employees. The command is simple enough: to do a good job knowing you are ultimately serving Christ by doing so. When you are on the job, doing it well is your greatest and most influential ministry. Also, verse 24 tells us your eternal rewards will in part be based on this ministry. What does verse 25 refer to: temporal consequences or eternal? I lean toward temporal, but no one can really be sure. The answer could be yes. Some say it could also refer to masters, given the second half of 4:1.

Employers: If fairness and justice was to be given to slaves, how much more to employees? This is the main thing most employees desire from their employers and managers. This is also part of your ministry: the world needs to see what a Christian businessman is like. It is good for the Christian employer to remember he, too, is ultimately serving the Lord Christ.

4:2 to 4:6--Our Testimony to the World

Our Prayers: It is said that if you want to convict a Christian, just ask about his prayer life. Paul reminds us to be earnest and vigilant in prayer, and full of thanksgiving. Here, however, the emphasis is not only on prayer for personal requests, but also for the progress of the gospel, especially for those who are engaged in preaching to those without Christ. Prayer is necessary, for we speak to dead men who cannot hear us. If anyone is going to be saved God will have to work in their heart to respond. We cannot produce this, so we must pray for it. Preachers need what Paul lists here: an open door for the word and clarity of speech, for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Our Practice: Of course we, too, interact with "those who are outside" the faith. We need wisdom to redeem time too often used by the devil, that it may be used for God's purposes instead. This includes being "ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us", but even when we are not directly speaking the gospel the manner of our speech is to be "seasoned with salt" to reflect the grace of God. Salt prevents corruption, so such speech is neither coarse nor cutting, but edifying. Eph. 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." This does not mean we are "preachy"-- quite the contrary. Salt also enhances flavor when used properly for an individual recipe, so our speech should be sensitive to the person we are speaking with, that we "may know how to answer each one." This is going to require that we are growing in our relationship to Christ, for ultimately it is only He who can produce this kind of sensitivity and speech in and through us.

4:7 to 4:15, and 4:17--People God Uses

In this section Paul commends his two messengers to the Colossians, and then sends greetings from his companions who are with him in Rome. There are lessons to be learned from each of these individuals.

Paul's Messengers

Tychicus: Appears five times in the NT, usually as a trusted messenger. The key characteristic of Tychicus was reliability. Paul could trust him with any important task, such as in this case delivering the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians. The Lord still raises up reliable believers like Tychicus. We value them greatly because they are workers that can always be counted upon.

Onesimus: Unlike the respected veteran Tychicus, Onesimus was a new believer. You will learn more about him in the next lesson, for he is the focus of the book of Philemon. He was one of them alright: a slave who had deserted his master Philemon and likely stole from him in the process! He made his way to Rome, where he encountered Paul who led him to Christ. The transformation was radical, for Paul regarded him as faithful. The fact he was standing with the reliable Tychicus would have been glowing testimony of Paul's confidence in him. Onesimus is a reminder of how Christ can save and transform anyone--even us.

Paul's Companions

The first three listed are Jewish Christians as we see from 11b, who were a comfort to Paul when most Jews rejected him.

Aristarchus: a Macedonian of Thessalonica, he was often a traveling companion of Paul, including on the sea voyage to Rome which experienced a fierce storm and eventual shipwreck on Malta. "Fellow prisoner" probably means he stayed with Paul in his house arrest and assisted him in any way possible. He is no doubt a good example of those with the gift of helps, selflessly and tirelessly helping the ministry behind the scenes. There are many such, each one very valuable to the work of the Lord.

Mark: The eventual writer of the gospel of the same name, he was "the man who came back" after deserting Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Paul refused him on a subsequent journey, but holds no grudge here, for Mark had since proven himself. His case is a testimony of God's ability to restore an erring believer, as well as an example of the call to other believers to forgive and forget upon genuine repentance.

Of Jesus who went by the name **Justus**, nothing else is known, except that humility is implied by his declining to use the name that also belongs to his Savior.

Epaphras: The one who likely planted the churches in all three towns listed here. His zeal for them never flagged, for he was a constant prayer warrior on their behalf, that they might stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. Such men are rare. We need more like him.

Luke: The beloved physician, companion of Paul, and eventual writer of the third gospel and the book of Acts. It is said he wrote more sheer words of the New Testament than any other man--including Paul.

Demas: Evidently faithful at this point, he eventually forsook Paul during his last imprisonment, "having loved this present world". His story is a reminder to us all of our need for the grace of God that we might stand.

Archippus: Son of Philemon. He could have been the young pastor of the Colossian church, since the letter to Philemon mentions the church that met in his house. This may not be a rebuke, since Paul calls him "fellow soldier". The exhortation is not unlike those to young Timothy to "let no on despise your youth", and to "fulfill your ministry." Some have suggested that one purpose behind the exhortation could have been to confirm to the whole congregation that Archippus was their rightful pastor, and therefore deserved to be respected as such that he may fulfill that ministry among them.

An Appendix

As mentioned in the introduction, you may consider this section optional and stop at this point if you prefer. It deals with three topics raised by certain verses: the "epistle from Laodicea" mentioned in 4:16, manuscript variants that occur in 4:8 and 4:15, and Paul's use of a secretary in 4:18. These things are profitable to discuss because they bear on the completeness and reliability of the Bible you hold in your hands.

The Epistle from Laodicea--4:16

There was likely a close affinity between the churches of Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colosse. They were arranged in a chain about 20 miles long, and were likely all planted by Epaphras who spent much time in each

and prayed for all of them as we have seen in 4:12 and 13. Hence Paul says in verse 16 he wants the Colossian epistle to be read in Laodicea as well. However, he also wants the Colossians to read "the epistle from Laodicea." So what is this epistle from Laodicea? Is your Bible missing some inspired scripture? There is no extant Greek manuscript for such a letter. Early church fathers mention a document claiming to be this letter, but they all agreed it was a spurious forgery to be rejected. No direct evidence of it survives. Some early editions of the Latin Vulgate contained a so-called letter to the Laodiceans, but it was Latin from the beginning and again everyone regarded it as a mash-up of other New Testament verses and considered it apocryphal (which means "of doubtful authenticity") similar to the apocryphal books bound in some printings of the Old Testament.

An alternative is that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans that was not Scripture. But there is no evidence of this, and why would he want such a non-authoritative document to be read in Colosse?

I believe the most likely identity of the "letter from Laodicea" is Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. Geography can help here. Ephesus was about 100 miles west of the cluster of three churches composed of Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colosse, themselves arranged respectively from west to east. Paul wrote Ephesians and Colossians at the same time from Rome, and both letters were delivered by Tychicus (see Ephesians 6:21) accompanied by Onesimus. Rome is far to the west of all these churches, so they would have arrived at Ephesus first, and then travelled to Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colosse in west-to-east order bringing the Ephesian and Colossian letters with them. Laodicea is the church immediately to the west of Colosse, so from the Colossians' perspective the Ephesian letter would have come to them "from Laodicea", which is no doubt why Paul refers to it that way in this letter addressed specifically to the Colossians.

So your Bible is not missing some inspired Scripture. We have God's promise in 2 Timothy 3:17 that the Scripture is all that is necessary to make the man of God complete. This would not be true if we did not have all Scripture, therefore we can be confident there is nothing missing. The God who breathed Scripture onto the page (2 Timothy 3:16) also caused the early church to recognize Scripture, and He preserved it to the present day. Your Bible is complete.

Manuscript Variants--4:8 and 4:15

As you know, the proliferation of new English translations of the New Testament in the last hundred years (especially in the last fifty years) has made every Christian aware that there are variations between the underlying Greek manuscripts upon which these translations are based. There are two such variants in Colossians 4, in verses 8 and 15, giving us an opportunity to discuss such things.

As you also know, none of the original documents penned by writers of the New Testament still exist. This is probably a good thing, because if they did exist they would likely be enshrined and worshiped. Instead, we have copies. For 1500 years these were made by hand, until the invention of the printing press around 1450 AD. There are about 5000 such manuscript copies, mostly of different parts of the New Testament. There are some differences, called variants, between these copies. No doubt most are due to copyist errors. The differences are minor, and it has been rightly said that no Christian doctrine depends upon a variant reading. Also, the remarkable thing about these manuscripts is how much they agree, not how much they differ. The Bible is by far the best attested document in history. The evidence for the biblical text is far greater than for any other ancient document. The existing Greek manuscripts have been categorized into two families based on the similarity of the text in each family. They are:

1) The Majority Text, containing some 5000 manuscripts. Until the 19th century, this family was essentially all that was available. Almost all of the King James version of 1611 is based on this. The exceptions are some portions where the manuscripts were not available to the translators at the time. The New King James version is likewise based on it, with notes pointing out where the Majority Text differs from the old King James, as well as where it differs from the other manuscript family, which is:

2) The Alexandrian Text, containing essentially two (2) manuscripts, both discovered in the area of Egypt in the late 18th century, and brought to light by writers in the late 19th century. These two manuscripts form the basis for the New American Standard, English Standard, and New International versions. In Bibles containing footnotes for variants, the Alexandrian Text is often referred to as the NU-Text, after the initials of the publishers of the two printed editions of these Greek manuscripts (Nestle-Aland, and United Bible Societies).

So how do 4:8 and 4:15 differ between the two manuscript families? I will use M-Text to designate the Majority Text, and NU-Text to designate the Alexandrian Text.

4:8

M-Text: "that he may know your circumstances"

NU-Text: "that you may know our circumstances"

If NU-Text is correct, then 4:8 is nearly identical to Ephesians 6:22. Did Paul intend for them to be the same? Perhaps. On the other hand, the Colossians were being tempted by false teachers, so perhaps Paul wanted Tychicus to "know their circumstances" and report back. We just don't know. Does it matter? Not greatly, but it does give one food for thought, especially if M-Text is correct.

4:15

M-Text: "Nymphas and the church that is in his house." (Nymphas is the masculine form of the name)

NU-Text: "Nympha and the church that is in her house." (Nympha is the feminine form of the name)

It would appear that one of these was a copyist's error, and someone else made the pronoun agree. Which one is correct? There is really no way to know. Does it matter? For our purposes, probably not at all.

Most variants are like these, where there is not much at stake. There are some with more important differences, but nothing that will change a doctrine. Consider this: When trying to make the call, perhaps the evidence of 5000 manuscripts, known throughout the ancient world, ought to be seriously considered before it is dropped in favor of two known only in Egypt.

All of this may raise the question, "If there are variations in the manuscripts, can we honestly claim the Bible is without error?" In answer, inerrancy is claimed for the original manuscripts, not the copies. Now, if the originals were not inerrant, then the copies would be worthless. If they were inerrant, then copies close to those inerrant originals teach the same infallible truths. The evidence is overwhelming that the copies are very close to the originals because only one word in a thousand is in question, and the variations that do exist are minor. Your Bible is an accurate translation based upon accurate manuscripts based upon an inerrant original. Thus you can rightly regard your Bible as the very word of God.

Paul's Secretary--4:18

Finally, we have verse 18 where we learn that Paul signed this letter in his own hand, which means he did not actually pen it himself but used an "amanuensis", that is, a secretary who recorded what Paul dictated. He did this on several occasions, in some of which the actual penman is named. Some could raise the question, "If an apostle didn't actually write it, can it really be the inerrant word of God?"

The Bible says it is the Scriptures that are inspired, not the men who wrote it. 2 Peter 1:21 says "Men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit", but 2 Timothy 3:16 confirms this resulted in *Scripture* that is God-breathed. The Bible does not contain mere thoughts of men about God, but records His actual words to you. For this purpose, God guided the hand of the scribe as well as the mind of Paul.

The bottom line: Your Bible is reliable. Use it.