

Colossians 3:18 – 4:1

Introduction

In this module, we explore a passage from the New Testament about family and household relationships.

Orientation to the Text

The New Testament book of Colossians takes the form of a letter from the apostle Paul and his co-worker Timothy to a group of Christ-followers in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor. (Today it would be in southwestern Turkey.)

Among other things, the text expresses hope that the recipients will stand firm in their faith in Christ as they have been taught, and will not be led astray by people who teach differently. Just before the passage printed below, the recipients are encouraged to live at peace with one another.

The passage itself concerns relationships within the household or *familia*. The household was a basic organizing unit of ancient societies, and could include what we would call “extended family,” as well as slaves. Slavery was a common feature of life in the ancient world. Most heads of households were men, although some were women.

Colossians was written in the first century CE, in Greek. Some scholars think it was written by Paul himself, and others think it was written slightly later by a follower of Paul.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the short excerpt from Colossians printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.

1. What are some similarities in the instructions for wives, children, and slaves? What are some differences?
2. What are some similarities in the instructions for men in their roles as husbands, fathers, and masters? What are some differences?
3. What sort of household structure does the passage envision? What sorts of households are *not* in view in this particular passage?

Colossians 3:18 – 4:1 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

³ ¹⁸ Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴ since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. ⁴ ¹ Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-3 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

4. For a text written in the 1st century CE – and presumably written by a man who was not a slave – the vision in Colossians of how members of the household should relate to one another is not usual. To the extent that it affirms hierarchical household structures, it is merely *reaffirming* structures that were already common in the wider society, not suggesting a new sort of structure.
 - a. How does the passage strike you differently if you read it as reaffirming a common household structure, rather than as proposing a new or different household structure?
 - b. How does it look different to read the passage against the backdrop of a 1st century society, rather than reading it as if it had been written today?
5. We cannot be sure why the author of the passage chose to write it, but one possibility is that he wanted to encourage Christ-followers to have the sorts of household relationships that would be admired in wider society – at least by people from certain social circles. This might have been especially important to an author writing in a context where Christ-followers were a small minority who were often treated with suspicion and hostility by their neighbours.
 - a. From your perspective, what are the pros and cons of trying to live in a way that “outsiders” will respect and admire?
 - b. Can you think of any contemporary analogies for religious communities today?
6. What concerns does the passage raise for you, or do you think it might raise for people in your society today? Discuss.

Further Reading and Watching

Note: The Scripture & Violence Project does not endorse all of the ideas expressed in these resources. We encourage you to think critically about what is said.

- Brief discussion of passages like Colossians 3: Carol Osiek. “Household Codes,” *Bible Odyssey* [online]. Available at: www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/household-codes [accessed 5 August 2021].
- Short video on women and slaves in the New Testament: Julia Snyder (2021), “Women and slaves in the Bible: Do Christian scriptures encourage discrimination?” (11 min). Available at: <https://youtu.be/hBvsnHzryas>.
- Other passages in the New Testament that reflect similar household structures: Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7.
- A short book on slavery in the 1st century: Jennifer A. Glancy (2011). *Slavery as Moral Problem in the Early Church and Today*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Christians continue to draw a wide range of different lessons for their own lives from New Testament passages about family. Here are two different examples:
 - o Tiffany Dawn (2017). “What ‘Submission’ Means to Us: A Different Perspective on Ephesians 5” [online]. Available at: https://youtu.be/_z3qb4ILEW4.
 - o Allen Parr (2018). “Should a Wife Submit to Her Husband EVEN When He’s Not Treating Her Right? Ephesians 5:22” [online]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/ogbUaMjpTV4>.
- In 19th century American debates about slavery, the Bible was cited by both pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates. See:
 - o J. Albert Harrill (2000). “The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate.” *Religion and American Culture* 10: 149–86.
 - o Chapter 1 (especially pp. 31–53) of Willard M. Swartley (1983). *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*. Scottdale: Herald.
 - o E. N. Elliott (ed.) (1860). *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartrwright on This Important Subject*. Augusta: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis. Available at: www.gutenberg.org/files/28148/28148-h/28148-h.htm.

Summary of Key Takeaways

- The New Testament includes passages where hierarchical household structures are affirmed.
- It is important to read scriptural passages in light of the historical context in which they were written, keeping the typical social structures of those societies in mind.
- Some people may advocate for a certain lifestyle for the sake of ensuring that their group is accepted and respected in wider society.
- Scriptural passages that reflect social norms that were common in other historical contexts may make people feel uncomfortable today.