

Proverbs 1:7-9 (Opening)

- 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 fools despise wisdom and instruction.***
- 8 Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
 and forsake not your mother's teaching,***
- 9 for they are a graceful garland for your head
 and pendants for your neck.***

Who's in charge at your house?

I've jokingly said several times that I wear the pants in my family; Marie just tells me which pair. When the kids were living at home, I wondered sometimes if they were in charge, because we always were going somewhere for them.

Now that the kids are gone, I wonder if our dog Duke is really in charge sometimes. We have bells on both front doors of the house, and we've trained Duke to ring the bell if he wanted to go outside. Now I wonder who's better trained, him or us, because every time the bell rings one of us jumps up to let Duke outside.

There have been and still are several cultures around the world where women have been in charge of the family; making decisions, running the household, even passing down property through the mother's line.

The ancient Greeks felt that it was natural for the man to be in charge of the household. But what was an ancient Greek household? Well, of course it included the husband and the wife, the children, and whatever household staff there was, which usually included slaves, not paid servants. Here's what Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, had to say about the structure of the family.

Politics 1, Part XII - Aristotle

Of household management we have seen that there are three parts- one is the rule of a master over slaves, ..., another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature. But in most constitutional states the citizens rule and are ruled by turns, for the idea of a constitutional state implies that the natures of the citizens are equal, and do not

differ at all. Nevertheless, when one rules and the other is ruled we endeavor to create a difference of outward forms and names and titles of respect, ... The relation of the male to the female is of this kind, but there the inequality is permanent. The rule of a father over his children is royal, for he rules by virtue both of love and of the respect due to age, exercising a kind of royal power. ... For a king is the natural superior of his subjects, but he should be of the same kin or kind with them, and such is the relation of elder and younger, of father and son.

Aristotle taught that men were superior to women, children, and slaves, by nature. Even the poorest male citizen was superior to the highest male slave. Slaves, of course, were an accepted part of the culture of the time. A person could become a slave by being captured during or after a war, being sold to pay a debt, or being born into slavery by the mother being a slave.

The Colossians, no doubt, lived this lifestyle written down by Aristotle. The man of the house, the Pater familias, or father of the family in Latin, had absolute control over the members of the household, including the servants. He had the power of life and death over everyone there. When Paul sends his letter to Colossae, he turns the entire lifestyle on its head. Let's look at Colossians 3:18-4:1.

Colossians 3:18-4:1

¹⁸ *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*

¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*

²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*

²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.* ²² *Bondservants, 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.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord*

Christ.²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

4 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Paul writes a similar and more detailed “Family Code” to the Christians in Ephesus in Ephesians 5:22-6:9. I won’t read that, but I’ll refer to sections of it while I’m talking about parallel scriptures in Colossians.

Before we look at individual sections of this scripture, let’s look at it as a whole. What’s really striking compared to what Aristotle wrote, is that the “lesser” person in each of the three pairs of interactions is addressed; and not just addressed, but addressed **first**. Aristotle and other Greek philosophers spoke only to the pater familias, the leader of the family. Also, Paul includes a reason for the behavior to each member he addresses, as opposed to Aristotle’s “It’s just natural”. Paul says to do it for Christ.

So, let’s look at Paul’s first aspect of the Christian Family Code, Colossians 3:18. He simply says for the wife to submit to the husband as is fitting in the Lord. The key word in this verse is submit.

The Greek word translated as submit is **ὑποτάσσω** [*hupotasso* /hoop·ot·as·so/]. The English word submit doesn’t do it justice. A better description would be a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden. In other words, it’s sharing the decision making and the work of leading the family, but deferring to the husbands leadership as the final word. It’s not being submissive in a negative way, but more as equals where one is appointed to lead.

In Ephesians 5:23, Paul gives more detail for the reason behind submitting to the husband.

Ephesians 5:23

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

The use of the word “head” here is interesting. In Greek culture, the head as a part of the body was considered to be the part that provided nourishment and life to the rest of the body. The head eats, breathes, hears, and sees. Without the head, the body dies. So, the husband is the provider for the wife and the family, just as Christ provides for the Church.

The next verse makes it even clearer. The husband is to love his wife and not “be harsh with them.” The Greek word translated as “be harsh with” can be translated as to make bitter, embitter, exasperate, or render angry. If you want someone to follow your lead, getting them angry or embittered is the worst way to do it. Paul goes into even more detail in Ephesians 5:25-28.

Ephesians 5:25-28

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Paul continues the head – body description here. Since the man is the head, he needs to love and take care of the body, just like Christ loves and takes care of the Church.

The next verse in Colossians 3 Paul tells children to obey their parents because it “pleases the Lord”. Just the way this is written compared to in Ephesians makes me think there were mostly gentiles in Colossae, and mostly Jews in Ephesus. Paul says in Ephesians 6:2, 3:

Ephesians 6:2, 3

² *“Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise),* ³ *“that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”*

It's also important to point out that children are told to “Obey” while wives are told to “submit”. These are totally different Greek words. The word obey is specifically about hearing a command and following it, as opposed to submit, which is a voluntary thing. Obey doesn't give an option.

To the fathers, or parents, Paul says don't provoke your children or they might become “discouraged”. The Greek word here is literally unspirited, or broken spirited. If you don't provide positive reinforcement to your kids, you'll break their spirit; they'll give up because they can never please you. “Why do a good job? It doesn't matter. I can't make him happy anyway.”

The last group Paul talks to in this section is slaves and masters. The Greek word translated as “bondservant” in the English Standard Version is probably better translated at “slave”. What's amazing here is that Paul spends so much time talking to slaves in this section. Out of the nine verses in today's scripture, four of them are directed at slaves. People who, according to the culture they were living in, had no real value and had absolutely no control over their life. It may be that there was a large population of slaves in the church at Colossae; or maybe Paul was specifically focused on the treatment of slaves because of Onesimus, Philemon's slave that Paul was sending back to him.

Paul tells the slaves in Colossae to obey their masters sincerely, not just when people are watching, but all the time. He also says to work like they were working for Christ, not their earthly masters, because they were serving Christ, and their earthly masters were subject to Christ, just like they are subject to their earthly masters.

Paul also tells the slaves here the basic concept of the Jewish “an eye for an eye”, that is, fair judgment. He says that God is impartial, and will punish or reward based on what has been done, not who a person is. Remember what it said back in Colossians 3:11

Colossians 3:11

¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

God doesn't see the differences; those are seen by us. To God, we're all the same. What matters is if we've obeyed His law or not.

The last verse in this “household code” that Paul sends to the Colossians speaks to masters. Remember, the “pater familias” or the head of the household was the master of the slaves in that household, so Paul is talking again to the husband here, but this time regarding the slaves. He says to treat his slaves fairly, because God is his master, or Lord. Everyone is subject to God's judgment equally.

These verses that speak to slaves and masters still apply to us today, even though we don't have slavery anymore. If you work for someone, you are subject to their authority. If you have someone working for you, you should treat them the way you would like to be treated.

To sum up what Paul says here, we should submit, lead, or obey the way the Lord would want us to. In other words, if we read Colossians 3:17 again:

Colossians 3:17

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Jesus is the reason.

1 Peter 3:1-7 (Closing)

¹ Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ² when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³ Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴ but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. ⁵ For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶ as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

⁷ Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Questions

1. For those of you who are married, how many of you vowed to “Obey” your husband? Does the discussion today change the way you look at that word?
2. Take a look at Deuteronomy 21:18-21. This is significantly different than when Paul said “for it pleases the Lord”. What impact do you think the passage from Deuteronomy would have on society today?
3. Regarding slaves and masters, how do you think this behavior would change the workplace environment?