

Submission Rules for Christian Households

Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Today our scripture names three of the most difficult & the most rewarding relationships we have. We look at wives and husbands; children and parents; masters or business owners, slaves, managers and workers. These have always been hot topics. If the Canadian Food Grains Bank had a hundredth of a penny for every word written about these relationships, they could feed the world many times over.

Our use of humor highlights the tensions. The speaker at a woman's club was lecturing on **marriage** & asked the women in the audience, how many wanted to "mother" their husbands. One member in the back row raised her hand. "You do want to mother your husband?" the speaker asked with skepticism. "Mother?" the woman echoed. "I thought you said smother." Since it's not politically correct to change this around, is a sign of the tension and times.

A **children's** Sunday school teacher was trying to demonstrate the difference between right and wrong. "Let's take an example," she said. "If I were to go into a man's pocket, take his wallet with all his money, what would I be?" A child in the back answered, "You would be his wife."

And **work relationships** give us many stories. Like this recent story about the Kroger grocery store chain. Pitchfork Economics host Nick Hanauer tweeted: "Whenever a corporation whines about raising wages, just Google the company's stock buyback's and you'll see where all their profits are really going."

Recently, Kroger announced a \$1 billion stock-buyback program for its stockholders. But the money could have been invested in Kroger's stores, customers, infrastructure, and labor force. It would have easily covered the \$5 an hour mandated hero pay at the stores that were being closed as well as rewarded stockholders. Some of the \$1 billion could have prevented creating food deserts in urban neighborhoods as well as reduced employment opportunities.

Kroger grocery chain might have referred to its employees as heroes during the pandemic, but if you follow the money, you can see where the company's priorities really lie – with profits, stockholders, and management's bonus'. No wonder the Bible talks about master – slave, employer – employee relationships!

What are corporate business practices like in Canada? We know when some banks closed, with good reasons, but who had decent profits, they created hardship for those without cars, making life more expensive as well as difficult.

The title of this sermon could be, Putting Christ First in all Relationships. Impacting the World for Jesus. Christian Living. Or, Submit to Each Other like Jesus did. Submission is a hot word.

If you want to become the center of attention, start talking about **submission**. This always has been a touchy topic, but today even more so. Do we submit to wearing masks and receiving the Covid vaccine? Do we submit to corrupt governments or resist or flee? Do we submit to traffic laws? During covid when there was less traffic, many drivers, drove way over the speed limits. We are just naturally sinfully bent to resist being told what to do. Freedom easily becomes a false idol. Submission is an attitude, posture and practice that recognizes the rights of authority, and helps communities thrive.

The Bible can be labeled a **submission manual** From cover to cover, it's about how we follow our Creator – on the Almighty's terms or ours? From the first sin mentioned, Adam and Eve, submission has been an important hot topic. The word here, translates from a military term, which means "to be subordinate," or "to place under" in a relationship. Various translations go, be subject to, obey, yield, place yourselves under authority, submit and so on. But this is in the context of how we can best live together.

A leader in a church council meeting surprised us when we were talking about members possible reactions to proposed church changes. He related to many different businesses as well as a variety of Mennonite Church institutions.

Here is what he said: In a Mennonite owned business he was involved with, with multiple stores, they discovered that it was better to hire ex-military people, rather than Mennonites. Why? Well, the ex-military people knew how to accept orders, as well as give them. The Mennonites almost always, questioned and debated the directives. And if they needed to instruct other employees what to do, they often left them confused as to what they were to do. So over time, the company decided, it was too much of a hassle to employ Mennonites.

Hearing this story made me reflect on how well we are willing to obey our Creator, much less church leaders. And it caused me to focus in on our Anabaptist cultural dynamics. The words used here indicate that wives are to accept a subordinate position with respect to their husbands. As are children with parents. And workers, with their employers. Some see this as a Christian blessing on the hierarchical view of marriage. Others, see voluntary mutual subordination as expressive of being in the Lord. Then there is the ethic patterned after Jesus own conduct as he followed God's will.

We have plenty of stories of how submission has been used in destructive and harmful ways, within the church as well as in the culture. But that is not a reason to dismiss difficult Bible texts like this one. We do need to uphold and explain the freedom the Bible advocates. We must ask, "Why do wives and children and workers, need to be told to be subordinate?" Where would they get the idea that it could be any other way than what they had always known in their culture? Something in the message of Jesus, must suggest the possibility of relationships of a different kind.

So, we need to keep explaining the historical context of different parts of the Bible. We must notice those with more power usually receive extra instructions and have more responsibility when we consider all the Biblical texts on these relationships. Plus it's not an accident that Paul constantly points out, "In this new life, with Jesus, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or

free, male or female, barbaric, uncivilized. Christ is all that matters & he lives in all of us."

These relationships are like when and how we respond to Christ with love and service because of the free gift of grace. We do not earn salvation for service. Instead, service is a fruit of our gratitude. In the same way, submission is not to be forced, but offered freely in response to love. It is something we replicate, like when we respond in kindness, so our response to each other is fueling the other's response, and so forth. In this way, we escalate kindness and love and freedom, instead of repression, abuse, dysfunction, cruelty, harshness, and profit.

We must always ask ourselves, are we living by the Fruits of the Spirit in all our relationships or not? With every relationship of any kind, are we keeping in mind what Jesus said – Love your neighbor as yourself? (Luke 10:27) With every relationship decision, do we keep in mind Jesus' instruction, "So in everything, do unto others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law & the Prophets." Mt 7:12

To become wrapped up in the dynamics of submission without bringing the full weight of the Gospel of Jesus, I think is unhelpful. Within this framework, all kinds of different specific ways of relating, depending on skills, interests, personalities, culture, and needs can work.

If we are honest, all of us wonder about some work, family, and marriage relationships. And we say – that's not for us. But if the relationships are healthy, reflect Christ, works for all those involved, and positively impacts the broader community - wonderful. Plus, we need to remember, everyone of us can improve the relationships we do have.

We should wonder, why is there no mention of mothers? Any answer would be speculation. But let us not assume from biblical silence that mothers tend to get things right at home more than fathers. The charge against embitterment and discouragement can, and does, equally apply to mothers and fathers. The possibility of corruption resides equally in each sex, and in

each of these relationships. So, we need Holy Spirit power in each of us & each relationship.

We can say, “The parents’ duty is to live out the Gospel to the children: that is, to assure their children that they are loved, accepted and valued for who they are, not for who they ought to be, should have been, or might become.” This only occurs as the spouses live out the Gospel for each other. And it only takes place when the Gospel is fully lived out in the workplace between employers and employees.

So let’s at **Chapter Three**. Because the verse and chapter numbers were assigned to the Bible many centuries after it was written, there are places where we can question the choice of chapter divisions. Chapter three is an example. It’s really one big idea broken down into 4 different parts. Part one is the **thesis** of the section. Paul claimed because Jesus is now our life, we should live lives that look up to and are pleasing to Him in order for us to appear in glory with Him. (verses 1-4)

The second part focuses upon how we should **not live**, by listing many sinful actions & ways of thinking that followers of Christ must avoid. (verses 5-11)

Verses 12 to 17, centers on how Christians **must live**. We are to dress in Jesus’ uniform. Paul cites many fruits of the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged that only grace, peace, worship, and thankfulness can keep the church together.

The fourth part is our scripture today. My Bible titles it **Rules** for Christian Households. Three of the common basic institutions within society are named: marriage, parenthood, and employment. It’s important to know that often slaves back then were part of the household. We see this in both OT and NT

Notice, in discussing these institutions, Paul addresses both the party that had little to no voice and no power in society, followed by addressing the party who had all the authority in the first century and in today’s society. This

focus extends to everyone in every situation, to all of relationships, without exception.

I think the weight of Biblical instruction is that human relationships are meant to be reciprocal. But the instructions in our text show a special concern for those who are weaker, looked down upon, and have less power in society: wives, children, and necessary workers – slaves.

Notice that Paul gives them attention especially since the culture denigrated these three groups of people. Christianity elevated women, valued children, and set things in motion to sabotage slavery. We must notice that Paul admonishes those in authority as he tells husbands, fathers, and employers - masters to be loving, kind, and fair. These pairs are to be studied together because the relationships are reciprocal & have mutual responsibility toward each other. We can’t talk about the responsibilities of one party without clarifying the obligations of the other.

Accountability is not one sided. The true test of our relationship with Christ is how we relate to others. Or to say it another way, the home is the first place we test our newness in Christ as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” The things to leave behind and the uniform we put on, must be lived out in our relationships. If Jesus is supreme in our life, then it should show in how we relate to the members of our family, spouse, children, and in the workplace.

In Christ, this does not mean that there is no gender differentiation in Christianity. Instead, verses like these force us to examine the ways that we consider ourselves better than others. In Christ, men are not more important than women or children, just as masters are not more important than slaves, or Jews more important than Gentiles. The social revolution of the Gospel is that all are one and unified in Christ. Plus, everyone is necessary for a community and an economy to function. It’s not an accident Jesus and Paul talk about unity so much.

The concept of submission is taught in many places in the Bible and does not mean slavery

or implied inferiority. Submission carries the idea of entrusting oneself to the leadership of another to accomplish a task. We don't know all the relationship dynamics that were occurring among the Colossae believers. And we have and could, argue endlessly about various situations.

But I think we can agree, whatever the actual arrangement in these relationships, when people find respect, honor, support, love, and have less fear, they find freedom, a release & fulfillment that can come in no other way. The end result will be an environment, community of intimacy, growth, respect, and partnerships that will make a difference in the world. Plus, hostility, abuse, distrust, & working against our own best family, individual, & community interests is decreased.

Bad relationships are often the result of the more powerful party unwillingness to listen and love. The weaker party can also be in the wrong in how they work at the relationship. How many wives would not be willing to follow the leadership of a man who loves her unconditionally and offers full support and respect? Same with how children are to be parented. And it's the same in employer – employee relationships. The point is: relationships are seldom 50-50 give-and-take. Good relationships require a 100%-100% give give give give give, no matter if the other person or party ever gives back. Why? Because that reflects the persistent love of the Almighty!

Ideally, if possible, this is how a business must function. An uncle of mine was a truck driver for an office furniture company. He delivered the furniture around the United States. I took a few trips with him over two Christmas's. But when his wife was diagnosed with cancer, his boss told him, "Take whatever time off you need with your wife. You always have a job here. Let us know when you can take a trip and we will get you on the road as fast as possible. And we will keep your health insurance going." Remember in the US, health insurance depends on your employer.

When my uncle told me this, he also added, "I have worked hard and been fair with my job. But the company could have not paid enough in salaries for everyone in the company to gain the increased loyalty they received from this act of kindness to me." He continued, "All the workers in the company often went the extra mile for the company. But this generosity, compassion, respect, honor, caused even better relationships between employees, management, and owners."

And it was clear my uncle before and after those few years dealing with his wife's cancer, lived out, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Col. 3:23-25)

At the heart of submission, when it is done as the Bible teaches, it means we move beyond self-interest and we think of the other person and the broader community and not just ourselves. Submission does not mean subservience. It means that we move beyond self-absorption and become focused on how we can love and serve others. Simply put, it means looking out for each other and the community, often creatively.

Paul is unapologetic. He claims over and over again, the kingdom of God works different than how we manage relationships in this world. The Bible wrecks havoc on the regular way of doing relationships. So, enough of this sinful hierarchy based strictly on human categories.

How about this - we are human, and we are in Christ and that is it. The rest of the historical, cultural, hierarchical structures, leave it to the empire, the principalities & powers. They are empty and will only lead to more destruction as they are not in Christ. Getting worked up about submission takes away our focus on our mutual responsibility to have Christlike relationships.

We must be aware that when Paul addresses the same relationships in Ephesians, he begins with

these words. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (5:21) This puts a whole other, new light on the details of how all our relationships are to work. Since everyone is expected to be subject to one another, in Christ, this is a common task all of us must work on.

We must pay attention to how our Colossians text ends. We are reminded or threatened – especially Masters, employers, “Provide your slaves, employees, with what is right and fair. We all have a Master in heaven – who is watching us.” (4:1) The Ephesians passage says something similar. “Do not threaten the slaves, workers, since you know the Almighty who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” (6:9)

The early Anabaptists understood the importance of the community of faith, the part that community and discipleship play in salvation and wholeness of the individual. They taught that faith produces a practical change in lifestyle. We cannot avoid living in community and what we do, believe, think, and speak, affects the community. This goes with the rights and individualism focus of today. So, we must build on this cultural and theological stream that has been in the Mennonite church.

The Anabaptists promoted the idea of yieldedness, *Gelassenheit*, which is the idea of self-surrender and resignation to God’s will. This was also seen as submission to the body of believers – to the community, for the good of the community – which includes, how Christlike our marriages, parenting, family, and work relationships are. May we model these rules for Christian households and for the family of God here at North Star and in this community.

Dan’s Notes:

The Christian ethic seems to be one of *reciprocal obligation*.

Verse 18 has this important loaded statement – “As is fitting in the Lord.” This establishes the criteria for what a proper relationship looks like. We have spent a lot of time in Colossians, talking about how to follow, honor Jesus.

Other texts on relationships – submission.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9; I Peter 2:13-3:7

The fact that slaves are addressed reflect:

1. Their participation in the community of faith.
2. A newfound freedom in Christ accords them personhood and choice.
3. The number of verses given to slaves probably reflects their relative numbers in the church, and / or their intensity of the questions being raised as slaves became fellow believers in Christ.
4. The book of Philemon was written to invite him, a slave owner, in Colossae, to treat Onesimus, his runaway slave – rightly – not as a typical cultural, societal master slave relationship. Its worth reading to reflect on how the church was dealing with this new challenge to society’s normal rules and treatment of slaves.

Contrast the rules – the responsibilities:

Wives, be submissive

Children, obey

Slaves, obey

Slaves, work with sincerity of hearts

Reverencing the Lord,

Show you are slaves of Jesus Christ

Husbands, love wives,

do not treat them harshly

do not irritate your children

Masters, provide treatment that is just and equitable.

Contrast Rewards, Warnings, Results, Principles

Wives – as is fitting in the Lord

Husbands – don’t cause your children to lose heart.

Slaves – never forget you will receive recompense, even your share of inheritance

Those who do wrong will be paid back.

There is no favoritism – respect of persons.

Masters – remember you too have a master in heaven.