



Colossians 3:18–21

18 Wives, submit yourselves 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 embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Reflection

In Genesis 3, in the Garden of Eden, sin

entered the human race through the deceptive and deceitful words of Satan and the choices of Adam and Eve. It's an amazing picture being painted, with incredible explanatory power.

Immediately sin went to work creating a rift between both God and humankind; and humankind and each other. This means that right at the heart of sin is broken relationship. Sin causes broken relationships; broken relationships with our heavenly Father, broken relationships with each other and broken relationship within ourself. And so it's no surprise to see this relational element amongst the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. Immediately, Adam and Eve who once walked freely and uninhibited in the presence of God went into hiding, covering their bodies in shame, na-

kedness of their person and nakedness of relationship no longer possible before God. You can hear it in Adam's voice, once so in love with God and his wife and now accusing them both, Gen 3:12,

‘The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’

Broken, marred and distorted relationship between God and humankind; and husband and wife – the result of the first sin, and one of the ongoing consequences of sin in our world. And this is made all the more poignant by God's prediction about the effects of sin on the marriage relationship in Gen 3:16 when he addresses Eve. God says to her,

Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.

The sense of the original language here is that as a result of the Fall, because of sin, a wife's desire will be to take her husband's place in the marriage relationship. At the same time, the husband's sinful tendency will be to abuse his position of leadership in marriage, ruling over his wife in a dominant, overbearing and wicked way, rather than serving her. And so again we see sin striking right at the heart of another treasured relationship; firstly the relationship between God and humankind, and secondly, our most precious human relationship, the relationship between husband and wife. And the result? Marital unrest. Secrets and distrust. Manipulating and undermining. Constant nagging, withdraw-

al and angry flare-ups. Belittling and demeaning. Domestic violence and abuse. Broken relationship, and so much pain, as a consequence of sin.

And so at the end of the creation accounts we see everything God created as good in tatters because of sin. Humankind is banished from relationship with God, the whole created order is groaning under the effects of sin, and the highpoint of God's creation, humankind, sees its most precious institution under threat from the inside out.

But even amidst the pain that this must have caused him God does not leave us without hope. Even as he's pronouncing the curse of sin's effects upon the human race he includes a message of hope. It's

known as the protoevangelium, the first gospel, Gen 3:15, talk of a serpent-crusher, one who will crush Satan's head even as Satan strikes his heel; talk of Jesus. And from this point on God would progressively work in human history, preparing the way for the coming of his Son, who would set everything right again, come to restore these relationships broken by sin.

Jesus Christ came to make humanity whole again. He came to bring peace between us and God, and between us and each other through his blood shed on the cross (Col 1:20). Jesus came to heal relationships and return them to their original design. And as we turn to one of the more controversial passages in the New Testament today, it's important that we see these verses against the background

that I've just sketched. Because this is the fullest context in which these verses are given. Today Paul turns from the healing and restoration Jesus Christ brings to relationships within the church, to the healing and restoration of relationships within the home. Today's passage, Colossians 3:18–21,

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We are God's crowning achievement in creation. He saved his best for last, and

the last thing God created, to steward and possess all he had created beforehand, is us. Male and female, he created us, equal, in that both males and females are equally created in the image of God. Not only does this give human life great dignity and worth, but it also underpins the absolute equality of men and women. And yet, just as within the three-become-one Godhead there is absolute equality within an ordering of relationship, so too in the two-become-one marriage relationship there is absolute equality within an ordering of relationship. Even in the eternally overflowing self-sacrificial love that characterizes the Trinity Jesus defers to the will of his Father, and the Holy Spirit, the 'Helper', helps them both.

Created in God's image, human marriage

echoes this divine ordering. God has placed the husband in a position of authority in marriage, referring twice in Genesis, for example, to Eve as her husband's helper (2:18, 20); equal in God's sight, but with different roles in the marriage relationship. And so given sin's tendency to attack relationships and distort and mar God's good design Paul turns today to God's design for the ordering of the Christian household,

18 Wives, submit yourselves 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 embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

In a male dominated patriarchal society that left unwanted baby girls to die at birth, and barely acknowledged the existence of children until they were of an age useful for work, these words are extraordinary. And in a world that has come so far when it comes to the rights of women and children exactly because of Christianity, words like these have somehow become inflammatory – because they are taken out of context and misunderstood.

Here's the context. Women, created in the image of God in absolute equality with men, submit yourself to a Christian husband who loves you as Christ loves the church and who lays his life down daily in love and service of you just as Jesus willingly died to self to lay his life down for the

church. Husbands, love your wife, always, following the character and example of Jesus, who exemplified gentleness, humility, service and self-sacrificial love for others. And treat your children just as Jesus did. Let them come to you, be patient and kind with them, protect and guide them, and patiently lead and disciple them to faith by showing them the same love that our Heavenly Father has shown his children.

This is God's good design for Christian households, the building blocks of Christian community and the society in which we live. And yet it is important to also recognise that this is the ideal that Christian family relationships aim at, only to regularly fall short because of the sin that still so often mars even our best intentions. People get into trouble when treating these vers-

es as black and white, without having the wisdom and grace to allow for the shades of grey in real human relationships.

Think & Pray

Spend some time today meditating over the relationships in your home if you are married and have children. If you are a husband you are bearing a heavy load. Pray for God's help. What does it look like for you to be obedient to Eph 5:25,

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

If you are a wife, how can you pray that your husband will increasingly resemble Jesus Christ? If he doesn't, or isn't a Chris-

tian, then pray for wisdom, seek counsel, but mostly pray that God would perform a work in your husband's heart to transform him into a man who in every way resembles Jesus.

If you are a married man, ask God to show you how to love your wife as Christ loved the church. Pray for her.

And if you're single, pray for those you know who are married. Because marriage, and the raising of children in the Lord, is one of the most difficult and important pursuits in life. Pray for them, help them; and should God intend for you to get married and have children one day then hide this passage of Scripture and its wider Biblical setting away in your heart as God's good design and intention for your future family too.