



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

10p

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 23rd November 2003
by Mark Ashton

Colossians 3:17 – 4:1

Happy Families

¹⁷ *‘And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’*

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 embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.’*

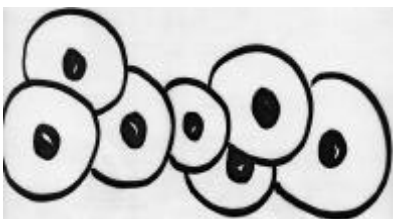
²² *‘Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.’* ²³ *‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,’* ²⁴ *‘since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.’* ²⁵ *‘Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism.’*

⁴ ¹ *‘Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.’*

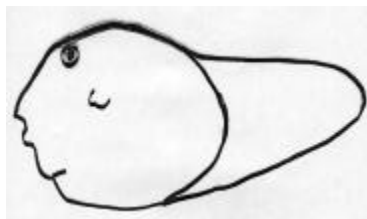
We are nearing the end of this Autumn’s series of sermons in Paul’s letter to the Colossians and so I need to summarize.

1) Where we’ve got to so far: The Tadpole

I am going to summarize by reference to a creature which starts its life like this [Fig.1]. Any guesses what it might be? Yes, frogspawn. It then becomes a tadpole [Fig.2] (which in some parts of the world is known as a pollywog), and ends its life like that, as a frog [Fig.3].



[Fig.1]



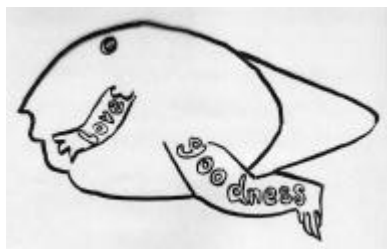
[Fig.2]



[Fig.3]

Now why, according to Paul in this letter to the Colossians, are we like tadpoles (if we’re Christian believers – I hope you’ll forgive a slightly undignified comparison)? Because we have to be born again. The Bible is quite insistent about that. We need a new birth, a new start, a new life: just as frogspawn has to hatch, all humans need that second birth: the gift of spiritual life from God. So in the previous chapter, Paul wrote this: *‘When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins . . . ’* (Col. 2:13). And that’s our position, as Christian believers, at the beginning of Colossians chapter 3: *‘Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, [that’s the new life] set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ,*

who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (3:1-4). There's a future glory to come, when we shall all be changed: when we appear with Him in glory. But for now, we are tadpoles. And we are involved in a process which Paul described as putting off the old and putting on the new: **'Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. . . .Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience'** (3:9, 10, 12). When you think about it, that is exactly what the tadpole does: he gradually loses that tail and gains legs and arms. So the Christian believer is putting off his old selfish self, and putting on the goodness and love of Christ, knowing all the time that he/she will one day be changed entirely by the action of God [Fig.4].



[Fig.4]

In today's passage we are considering the losing-the-tail-and-putting-on-the-arms-and-legs process. Remember, first you have to hatch. You must be born again! Once hatched, this is the Christian believer's life – a daily adventure in living in an entirely new way on earth. Paul is very practical. He focuses in on our daily lives in the household: **'Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them'** (3:18, 19).

But don't let's miss the most important lesson here, which with due deference to a certain trilogy soon to be complete in our cinemas, I've called:

2) One Relationship to rule them all! (v. 17)

'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' Verses 18 onwards follow straight on from verse 17. We are bound to ask, "What is so new and different about these ethical instructions as to how various members of the household should treat each other? What is so special about them?" Many belief systems have codes of behaviour not very different from this (1st Century Stoic philosophy, for example). Well, notice that all the members of the household are addressed equally by Paul, as ethically responsible individuals. He addresses three pairs: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters (remember, the household in the ancient world was likely to be the workplace as well as the home). It is an ethic of reciprocal obligation: what we owe to each other. It focuses not on rights, but on responsibilities; not on what I am owed, but on what I owe. And clearly the man of the household is being particularly targeted to face up to his obligations and responsibilities here: since potentially he features in all three pairs as husband, as father and as master. All would be the same person in most households.

But when we have acknowledged those special aspects of this teaching and recognised, as we did last week, that the Christian faith taught the world an entirely new standard of human behaviour, we have still not located the peculiarly unique aspect of this passage. It is wrapped up in one word that comes 7 times in these 9 verses. See if you can spot it. (I should say that the final time it comes, it is translated by a different word in the English; but they do give it a capital!) Have you got it? It is in verses 18, 20, 22, 23, 24 (twice) and chapter 4 verse 1. The Lord (or the Master). Whatever category we may come in, wife/husband/children/parent/slave/master, we are invited to understand our role in terms of our relationship with Jesus:

'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'

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

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

'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.' (vv. 17, 18, 20, 22-24).

So, for example, let's look for a moment at what Paul says to slaves. It is not easy for us to step back into the mindset of a 1st Century slave. Their condition was probably less resented than we would expect, more accepted as a fact of life. But the slave had no rights whatsoever. A slave could not inherit – anything from anybody. You never had to reward or recompense or even thank your slave. The most a slave could expect was punishment and retribution if they did not do all that was expected of them. Now look at verses 23 and 24: ***'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'*** Do we see what Paul is saying to Christian slaves? Your slavery has become your worship. The Christian slave would show what he thought of Jesus by doing his slavery better. And in his slavery he would experience the grace of God. No possible inheritance from men, but an inheritance from the Lord as a reward: ***'It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'***

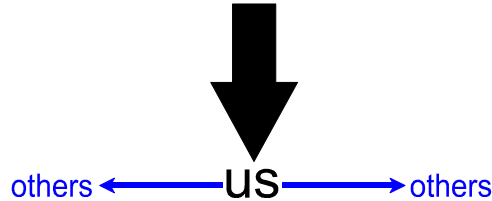
You see, we have a terrible tendency to get the direction of flow wrong in our understanding of the spiritual life. In the household it is Jesus Christ's relationship with us [Fig.5] that is to dominate our relationship with others [Fig.6]. On the other hand, when we meet like this in church, we tend to think our gathering is all about relating to God. But actually what the New Testament has to say about Christians meeting together points us in a different direction. It tells us to take one another more seriously, as we try to encourage and edify one another. Read 1 Corinthians 11-14 some time if you are not clear about that. (That is why the New Testament does not use the word 'worship' about Christians meeting together.) But we over-emphasise the vertical at the expense of the horizontal. But then, when it comes to relating to one another in the household or the workplace, we do the opposite: we tend to over-emphasise the horizontal and underplay the vertical.

Christ



[Fig.5]

Christ



[Fig.6]

There is one relationship to rule all other relationships. So, when we are trying to get a relationship right on earth, we need to get our relationship with heaven right. Don't think 'domineering husband'; think God. Don't think 'nagging wife'; think God. Don't think 'rebellious teenager' or 'absent father', or 'lazy employee', 'lazy student', 'over-demanding supervisor'; think God.

So now let's see how that works itself out in the various relationships listed here. The shelves of Waterstones, Borders and/or Heffers are stuffed with books about marriage and family life and how to survive in the workplace. Paul writes just a few well-chosen words, because the secret lies in what we have already considered: the one relationship to rule them all.

3) A Few, well-chosen Words (and we can be brief because I know that a number of the Bible Study groups in the church have already discussed this passage in detail. If you haven't, then read Ephesians 5:22 to 6:10 for Paul's own commentary)

So, a few well-chosen words about:

(a) Wives: ***'Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord'*** (v. 18). In Ephesians 5:21 Christians are told to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ, so clearly submission has to do with an attitude, not a position. Not who comes below who – it is not like queuing to get through a revolving door on a church house party, everyone trying to get everyone else to go first (one of the slowest procedures known to man). But notice that, if a wife has a problem submitting to her husband, she has a problem not with her husband, but with God: ***'Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.'***

(b) Husbands: *'Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them'* (v. 19). James Dobson commented that he has never encountered a marriage where, if the husband is putting his wife's best interests first, the wife has found it hard to submit to him. Notice, the husband is not told to make sure that his wife submits: he is told to love her, and not to be harsh with her. I have discovered over and over again the untold damage of my thoughtless, wounding words that so scar the marriage relationship ("And not just your marriage, Mark," some of you will doubtless be thinking). How easy I find it to be harsh!

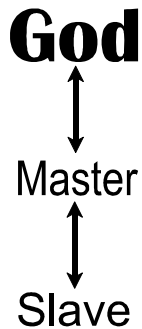
(c) Children: *'Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord'* (v. 20). This would be children at home, still dependent on their parents' support. But notice, they are addressed as independent church members in their own right, not the church of tomorrow but the church of today. Notice, they are not to obey their parents in order to please their parents, but in order to please Jesus Christ. (And so whether a particular course of action is actually pleasing to Christ or not will regulate a child's obedience to their parents.) A Christian child seeks to be a good child not for his parents' sake, but for Christ's sake. And Susanna Wesley put that the other way round when she said, "Parents, if we want our children to obey Jesus, we must teach them to obey us."

(d) Fathers: *'Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged'* (v. 21). A father's praise plays a special part in his child's development. Giving them my time and attention is the third most important thing I can provide for my children (after modelling to them my own faith in Jesus, and my commitment to their mother). James Dobson has written, 'A Christian man is obliged to lead his family to the best of his ability. If the family never reads the Bible or seldom goes to church, God holds that man accountable. If the children are disrespectful or disobedient, the primary responsibility lies with the father. In my view America's greatest need is for husbands to begin guiding their families, rather than pouring every physical and emotional resource into their careers and their earnings.' And once again do not let's lose the theological framework: we do not try to parent our children well for their sake, in order that they may turn out well. They are not our products. We try to parent them well for God's sake, because He has been a perfect Father to us. Keep the vertical dimension: do it for His sake!

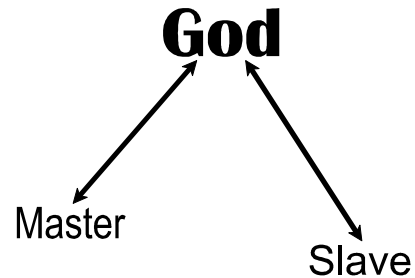
(e) Slaves: *'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism'* (vv. 22-25). It may be that Paul has more to say to the slave than to the master (or indeed to wife/husband/child or father) because there were many more slaves than there were masters in the fellowship of believers in Colossae. We do not know. We have already considered what a radical approach to the condition of slavery this was: to turn it into worship. But then that is what all our work is: schoolwork; a College course; research; nursing; banking; waiting; labouring; exciting, stimulating, challenging work; dull, humdrum, demeaning work: it is how you and I, if we are Christian believers, worship God. We show what we think of Him by how we do our work (or how we handle unemployment for that matter). You may have heard of the gravestone inscription which reads 'Sacred to the memory of Major James Brush, tragically killed by the accidental discharge of his pistol in the hand of his orderly. 14th April 1831'. And below that epitaph it said: Matthew ch. 25 v. 21 *'Well done, good and faithful servant!'* But we are not here to please the teacher, the supervisor, the manager, the editor, the boss, the head, the consultant, the bishop. We are here to please God – and, if we find it hard to work that way, think how hard it must have been for the slave with an unjust, despotic master: *'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism'* (vv. 22-24). So, finally:

(f) Masters: *'Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven'* (4:1). Paul was not here writing the script for Spartacus, but he was applying the theology that would eventually lead, many centuries later, to the abolition of the slave trade and to slave emancipation. Notice that 'you also'. We might read that: As slaves have masters here on earth, so the masters also have a Master in heaven: *'Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.'*

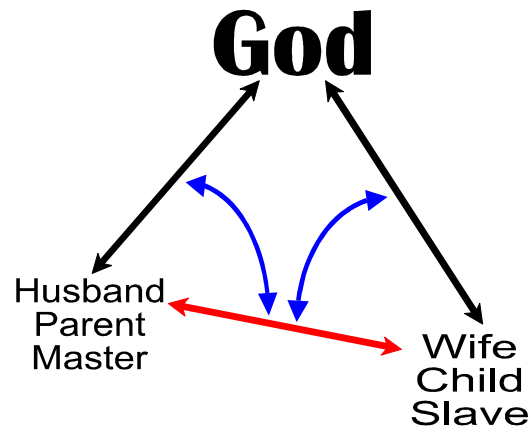
Like this [Fig.7]. But that is not what Paul is saying. Not in any of these relationships. No. No. Paul is saying “Both you and the slave have the same Master (‘Lord’ is the same word – as in vv. 23, 23 & 24) in heaven.” [Fig.8].



[Fig.7]



[Fig.8]



[Fig.9]

It is an asymmetrical relationship between you but, as a Christian, you are to understand it in terms of your relationship to God, not in terms of your relationship with each other. This is true of all these relationships [Fig.9].

We must understand them vertically. That is what Paul meant when he wrote that we were to set our minds on things above (vv. 1 & 2). Or in the words of verse 17: *‘And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’*