

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XXII.

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY.

"Wives, be in subjection to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.

"Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing in the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children, that they be not discouraged.

"Servants, obey in all things them that are your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord: whatsoever ye do, work heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that from the Lord ye shall receive the recompense of the inheritance: ye serve the Lord Christ. For he that doeth wrong shall receive again for the wrong that he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.

"Masters, render unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven."—Col. iii. 18-iv. 1 (Rev. Ver.).

THIS section deals with the Christian family, as made up of husband and wife, children, and servants. In the family, Christianity has most signally displayed its power of refining, ennobling, and sanctifying earthly relationships. Indeed, one may say that domestic life, as seen in thousands of Christian homes, is purely a Christian creation, and would have been a new revelation to the heathenism of Colossæ, as it is to-day in many a mission field.

We do not know what may have led Paul to dwell with special emphasis on the domestic duties, in this letter, and in the contemporaneous Epistle of the Ephesians. He does so, and the parallel section there should be carefully compared throughout with this paragraph. The former is considerably more expanded, and may have been written after the verses before us; but, however that may be, the verbal coincidences and the variations in the two sections are very interesting as illustrations of the way in which a mind fully charged with a theme will freely repeat itself, and use the same words yet in different combinations and with infinite shades of modification.

The precepts given are extremely simple and obvious.

Domestic happiness and family Christianity are made up of very homely elements. One duty is prescribed for the one member of each of the three family groups, and varying forms of another for the other. The wife, the child, the servant are bid to obey; the husband to love, the father to show his love in gentle considerateness; the master to yield his servants their dues. Like some perfume distilled from common flowers that grow on every bank, the domestic piety which makes home a house of God, and a gate of heaven, is prepared from these two simples—obedience and love. These are all.

We have here then the ideal Christian household in the three ordinary relationships which make up the family; wife and husband, children and father, servant and master.

I. The Reciprocal Duties of wife and husband—subjection and love.

The duty of the wife is “subjection,” and it is enforced on the ground that it is “fitting in the Lord”—that is, “it is,” or perhaps “it became” at the time of conversion, “the conduct corresponding to or befitting the condition of being in the Lord.” In more modern language—the Christian ideal of the wife’s duty has for its very centre—subjection.

Some of us will smile at that; some of us will think it an old-fashioned notion, a survival of a more barbarous theory of marriage than this century recognises. But, before we decide upon the correctness of the apostolic precept, let us make quite sure of its meaning. Now, if we turn to the corresponding passage in Ephesians, we find that marriage is regarded from a high and sacred point of view, as being an earthly shadow and faint adumbration of the union between Christ and the Church.

To Paul, all human and earthly relationships were moulded after the patterns of things in the heavens, and the whole fleeting visible life of man was a parable of the

“ things which are ” in the spiritual realm. Most chiefly, the holy and mysterious union of man and woman in marriage is fashioned in the likeness of the only union which is closer and more mysterious than itself, namely that between Christ and His Church.

What then is the nature, what is the spring of the Church’s “ subjection ” to Christ? Such is the wife’s to the husband. That is to say, it is a subjection of which love is the very soul and animating principle. In a true marriage, as in the loving obedience of a believing soul to Christ, the wife submits, not because she has found a master, but because her heart has found its rest. Everything harsh or degrading melts away from the requirement when thus looked at. It is a joy to serve where the heart is engaged, and that is eminently true of the feminine nature. For its full satisfaction, a woman’s heart needs to look up where it loves. She has certainly the fullest wedded life who can “ reverence ” her husband. For its full satisfaction, a woman’s heart needs to serve where it loves. That is the same as saying that a woman’s love is, in the general, nobler, purer, more unselfish than a man’s, and therein, quite as much as in physical constitution, is laid the foundation of that Divine ideal of marriage, which places the wife’s delight and dignity in sweet loving subjection.

Of course the subjection has its limitations. “ We must obey God rather than man ” bounds the field of all human authority and control. Then there are cases in which, on the principle of “ the tools to the hands that can use them, ” the rule falls naturally to the wife as the stronger character. Popular sarcasm, however, shows that such instances are felt to be contrary to the true ideal, and such a wife lacks something of repose for her heart.

No doubt, too, since Paul wrote, and very largely by Christian influences, women have been educated and ele-

vated, so as to make mere subjection impossible now, if ever it were so. Woman's quick instinct as to persons, her finer wisdom, her purer discernment as to moral questions, make it in a thousand cases the wisest thing a man can do to listen to the "subtle flow of silver-paced counsel" which his wife gives him. All such considerations are fully consistent with this apostolic teaching, and it remains true that the wife who does not reverence and lovingly obey is to be pitied if she cannot, and to be condemned if she will not.

And what of the husband's duty? He is to love, and because he loves, not to be harsh or bitter, in word, look or act. The parallel in Ephesians adds the solemn elevating thought, that a man's love to the woman, whom he has made his own, is to be like Christ's to the Church. Patient and generous, utterly self-forgetting and self-sacrificing, demanding nothing, grudging nothing, giving all, not shrinking from the extreme of suffering and pain and death itself—that he may bless and help—such was the Lord's love to His bride, such is to be a Christian husband's love to his wife. That solemn example, which lifts the whole emotion high above mere passion or selfish affection, carries a great lesson too as to the connexion between man's love and woman's "subjection." The former is to evoke the latter, just as in the heavenly pattern, Christ's love melts and moves human wills to glad obedience which is liberty. We do not say that a wife is utterly absolved from obedience where a husband fails in self-forgetting love, though certainly it does not lie in *his* mouth to accuse her, whose fault is graver than and the origin of hers. But, without going so far as that, we may recognise the true order to be that the husband's love, self-sacrificing and all-bestowing, is meant to evoke the wife's love, delighting in service, and proud to crown him her king.

Where there is such love, there will be no question of

mere command and obedience, no tenacious adherence to rights, or jealous defence of independence. Law will be transformed into choice. To obey will be joy; to serve, the natural expression of the heart. Love uttering a wish speaks music to love listening; and love obeying the wish is free and a queen. Such sacred beauty may light up wedded life, if it catches a gleam from the fountain of all light, and shines by reflection from the love that binds Christ to His Church as the links of the golden beams bind the sun to the planet. Husbands and wives are to see to it that this supreme consecration purifies and raises their love. Young men and maidens are to remember that the nobleness and heart-repose of their whole life may be made or marred by marriage, and to take heed where they fix their affections. If there be not unity in the deepest thing of all, love to Christ, the sacredness and completeness will fade away from any love. But if a man and woman love and marry "in the Lord," He will be "in the midst," walking between them, a third who will make them one, and that threefold cord will not be quickly broken.

II. The Reciprocal Duties of children and parents—obedience and gentle loving authority.

The injunction to children is laconic, decisive, universal. "Obey your parents in all things." Of course, there is one limitation to that. If God's command looks one way, and a parent's the opposite, disobedience is duty—but such extreme case is probably the only one which Christian ethics admit. The Spartan brevity of the command is enforced by one consideration, "for this is well-pleasing *in* the Lord," as the Revised Version rightly reads, instead of "to the Lord, as in the Authorized, thus making an exact parallel to the former "fitting in the Lord." Not only to Christ, but to all who can appreciate the beauty of goodness, is filial obedience beautiful. The parallel in Ephesians substitutes "for this is right," appealing to the

natural conscience. Right and fair, in itself it is accordant with the law stamped on the very relationship, and witnessed as such by the instinctive approbation which it evokes.

No doubt, the moral sentiment of Paul's age stretched parental authority to an extreme, and we need not hesitate to admit that the Christian idea of a father's power and a child's obedience has been much softened by Christianity; but the softening has come from the greater prominence given to love, rather than from the limitation given to obedience.

Our present domestic life seems to me to stand sorely in need of Paul's injunction. One cannot but see that there is great laxity in this matter in many Christian households, in reaction perhaps from the too great severity of past times. Many causes lead to this unwholesome relaxation of parental authority. In our great cities, especially among the commercial classes, children are generally better educated than their fathers and mothers, they know less of early struggles, and one often sees a sense of inferiority making a parent hesitate to command, as well as a misplaced tenderness making him hesitate to forbid. A very misplaced and cruel tenderness it is to say "would you like?"; when he ought to say "I wish." It is unkind to lay on young shoulders "the weight of too much liberty," and to introduce young hearts too soon to the sad responsibility of choosing between good and evil. It were better and more loving by far to put off that day, and to let the children feel that in the safe nest of home, their feeble and ignorant goodness is sheltered behind a strong barrier of command, and their lives simplified by having the one duty of obedience. To many parents the advice is needed—consult your children less, command them more.

And as for children, here is the one thing which God

would have them do: "Obey your parents in all things." As fathers used to say when I was a boy—"not only obedience, but prompt obedience." It is right. That should be enough. But children may also remember that it is "pleasing"—fair and good to see, and making them agreeable in the eyes of all whose approbation is worth having, and pleasing to themselves, saving them from many a bitter thought in after days, when the grave has closed over father and mother. One remembers the story of how Dr. Johnson, when a man, stood in the market place at Lichfield, bareheaded, with the rain pouring on him, in remorseful remembrance of boyish disobedience to his dead father. There is nothing bitterer than the too late tears for wrongs done to those who are gone beyond the reach of our penitence. "Children, obey your parents in all things," that you may be spared the stings of conscience for childish faults, which may be set tingling and smarting again even in old age.

The law for parents is addressed to "fathers," partly because a mother's tenderness needs the warning "provoke not your children," less than a father's more rigorous rule usually does, and partly because the father is regarded as the head of the household. It is full of practical sagacity. How do parents provoke their children? By unreasonable commands, by perpetual restrictions, by capricious jerks at the bridle, alternating with as capricious dropping the reins altogether, by not governing their own tempers, by shrill or stern tones where quiet, soft ones would do, by frequent checks and rebukes, and sparing praise. And what is sure to follow such mistreatment by father or mother? First, as the parallel passage in Ephesians has it, "wrath"—bursts of temper, for which probably the child is punished and the parent is guilty—and then spiritless listlessness and apathy. "I cannot please him whatever I do," leads to a rankling sense of injustice, and then to recklessness—

“it is useless to try any more.” And when a child or a man loses heart, there will be no more obedience. Paul’s theory of the training of children is closely connected with his central doctrine that love is the life of service, and faith the parent of righteousness. To him hope and gladness and confident love underlie all obedience. When a child loves and trusts, he will obey. When he fears and has to think of his father as capricious, exacting or stern, he will do like the man in the parable, who was afraid because he thought of his master as austere, reaping where he did not sow, and went and hid his talent. Children’s obedience must be fed on love and praise. Fear paralyses activity, and kills service, whether it cowers in the heart of a boy to his father, or of a man to his Father in heaven.

So parents are to let the sunshine of their smile ripen their children’s love to fruit of obedience, and remember that frost in spring scatters the blossoms on the grass. Many a parent, especially many a father, drives his child into evil by keeping him at a distance. He should make his boy a companion and playmate, teach him to think of his father as his confidant, try to keep his child nearer to himself than to anybody beside, and then his authority will be absolute, his opinions an oracle, and his lightest wish a law. Is not the kingdom of Jesus Christ based on His becoming a brother and one of ourselves, and is it not wielded in gentleness and enforced by love? Is it not the most absolute of rules? and should not the parental authority be like it—having a reed for a sceptre, lowliness and gentleness being stronger to rule and to sway than the “rods of iron which earthly monarchs wield”?

There is added to this precept, in Ephesians, an injunction on the positive side of parental duty: “Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” I fear that is a duty fallen woefully into disuse in many Christian households. Many parents think it wise to send their children away

from home for their education, and so hand over their moral and religious training to teachers. That may be right, but it makes the fulfilment of this precept all but impossible. Others, who have their children beside them, are too busy all the week, and too fond of "rest" on Sunday. Many send their children to a Sunday school chiefly that they themselves may have a quiet house and a sound sleep in the afternoon. Every Christian minister, if he keeps his eyes open, must see that there is no religious instruction worth calling by the name in a very large number of professedly Christian households; and he is bound to press very earnestly on his hearers the question, whether the Christian fathers and mothers among them do their duty in this matter. Many of them, I fear, have never opened their lips to their children on religious subjects. Is it not a grief and a shame that men and women with some religion in them, and loving their little ones dearly, should be tonguetied before them on the most important of all things? What can come of it but what does come of it so often that it saddens one to see how frequently it occurs—that the children drift away from a faith which their parents did not care enough about to teach them? A silent father must make prodigal sons, and many a grey head has been brought down with sorrow to the grave, and many a mother's heart broken, because he and she neglected their plain duty, which can be handed over to no schools or masters—the duty of religious instruction. "These words which I command thee, shall be in thine heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently to thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house."

III. The Reciprocal Duties of servants and masters—obedience and justice,

The first thing to observe here is, that these "servants" are slaves, not persons who have voluntarily given their work for wages. The relation of Christianity to slavery is

too wide a subject to be touched here. It must be enough to point out that Paul recognises that "sum of all villainies," gives instructions to both parties in it, never says one word in condemnation of it. More remarkable still, the messenger who carried this letter to Colossæ carried in the same bag the Epistle to Philemon, and was accompanied by the fugitive slave Onesimus, on whose neck Paul bound again the chain, so to speak, with his own hands. And yet the gospel which Paul preached has in it principles which cut up slavery by the roots, as we read in this very letter, "in Christ Jesus there is neither bond nor free." Why then did not Christ and his apostles make war against slavery? For the same reason for which they did not make war against *any* political or social institutions. "First make the tree good and his fruit good." The only way to reform institutions is to elevate and quicken the general conscience, and then the evil will be outgrown, left behind, or thrown aside. Mould men and the men will mould institutions. So Christianity did not set itself to fell this upas tree, which would have been a long and dangerous task; but girdled it, as we may say, stripped the bark off it, and left it to die—and it *has* died in all Christian lands now.

But the principles laid down here are quite as applicable to our form of domestic and other service as to the slaves and masters of Colossæ.

Note then the extent of the servant's obedience—"in all things." Here, of course, as in former cases, the limit is presupposed of supreme obedience to God's commands; that being safe, all else is to give way to the duty of submission—a stern command, that seems all on the side of the masters, and that might strike a chill into many a slave, who had been drawn to the gospel by the hope of finding some little lightening of the yoke that pressed so heavily on his poor galled neck, and of hearing some voice speaking in tenderer tones than those of harsh command.

Still more emphatically, and, as it might seem, still more harshly, the Apostle goes on to insist on the inward completeness of the obedience—"not with eyeservice" (a word of Paul's own coining) as "men-pleasers." We have a proverb about the worth of the master's eye, which bears witness that the same faults still cling to hired service. One has only to look at the next set of bricklayers one sees on a scaffold, or of haymakers one comes across in a field, to see it. The vice was venial in slaves; it is inexcusable, because it darkens into theft, in paid servants—and it spreads far and wide. All scamped work, all productions of man's hand or brain which are got up to look better than they are, all fussy parade of diligence when under inspection and slackness afterwards—and all their like which infect and infest every trade and profession, are transfixed by the sharp point of this precept.

"But in singleness of heart," that is, with undivided motive, which is the antithesis and the cure for "eyeservice"—and "fearing God," which is opposed to "pleasing men." Then follows the positive injunction, covering the whole ground of action and lifting the constrained obedience to the earthly master up into the sacred and serene loftiness of religious duty, "whatsoever ye do, work heartily," or from the soul, where the word for *work* is stronger than that for *do*, and implies effort and toil. They are to put all their power into their work, and not be afraid of hard toil. And they are not only to bend their backs to it, but they are to give their good will, and toil, "from the soul," that is, cheerfully and with interest, to their master's will—a hard lesson for a slave, and asking more than could be expected from human nature, as many of them would, no doubt, think. He goes on to transfigure the squalor and misery of the slave's lot by a sudden beam of light—"as to the Lord"—your true "master," for it is the same word—"and not unto men." Do not think of your tasks as only enjoined by

harsh, capricious, selfish men, but lift your hearts to Christ, who is your Lord, and glorify all these sordid duties by seeing His wonderful will in them. He only who works as "to the Lord," will work "heartily." The thought of Christ's command, and of my poor toil as done for His sake, will change constraint into cheerfulness, and make unwelcome tasks pleasant, and monotonous ones fresh, and trivial ones great. It will evoke new powers, and renewed consecration. Plunged into that atmosphere, the dim flame of servile obedience will burn more brightly, as a lamp plunged into a jar of pure oxygen.

The stimulus of a great hope for the ill-used, unpaid slave, is added. Whatever their earthly masters might fail to give them, the true Master whom they really served would accept no work for which He did not give more than sufficient wages. "From the Lord ye shall receive the recompense of the inheritance." Blows and scanty food and poor lodging may be all that they get from their owners for all their sweat and toil, but if they are Christ's slaves, they will be treated no more as slaves, but as sons, and receive a son's portion, the exact recompense which consists of the "inheritance." The juxtaposition of the two ideas of the slave and the inheritance evidently hints at the unspoken thought, that they are heirs because they are sons—a thought which might well lift up bowed backs and brighten dull faces. The hope of that reward came like an angel into the smoky huts and hopeless lives of these poor slaves. It shone athwart all the gloom and squalor, and taught patience beneath "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely." Through long, weary generations it has lived in the hearts of men driven to God by man's tyranny, and forced to clutch at heaven's brightness to keep them from being made mad by earth's blackness. It may irradiate our poor lives, especially when we fail, as we all do sometimes, to get recognition of our work, or fruit from

it. If we labour for man's appreciation or gratitude, we shall certainly be disappointed; but if for Christ, we have abundant wages beforehand, and we shall have an overabundant requital, the munificence of which will make us more ashamed than anything else could do, of our unworthy service. Christ remains in no man's debt. "Who hath first given, and it shall be recompensed to him again?"

The last word to the slave is a warning against neglect of duty. There is to be a double recompense—to the slave of Christ the portion of a son; to the wrong doer retribution "for the wrong that he has done." Then, though slavery was itself a wrong, though the master who held a man in bondage was himself inflicting the greatest of all wrongs, yet Paul will have the slave think that he still has duties to his master. That is part of Paul's general position as to slavery. He will not wage war against it, but for the present accept it. Whether he saw the full bearing of the gospel on that and other infamous institutions may be questioned. He has given us the principles which will destroy them, but he is no revolutionist, and so his present counsel is to remember the master's rights, even though they be founded on wrong, and he has no hesitation in condemning and predicting retribution for evil things done by a slave to his master. A superior's injustice does not warrant an inferior's breach of moral law, though it may excuse it. Two blacks do not make a white. Herein lies the condemnation of all the crimes which enslaved nations and classes have done, of many a deed which has been honoured and sung, of the sanguinary cruelties of servile revolts, as well as of the questionable means to which labour often resorts in modern industrial warfare. The homely, plain principle, that a man does not receive the right to break God's laws because he is ill-treated, would clear away much fog from some people's notions of how to advance the cause of the oppressed.

But, on the other hand, this warning may look towards the masters also ; and probably the same double reference is to be discerned in the closing words to the slaves, "and there is no respect of persons." The servants were naturally tempted to think that God was on their side, as indeed He was, but also to think that the great coming day of judgment was mostly meant to be terrible to tyrants and oppressors, and so to look forward to it with a fierce un-Christian joy, as well as with a false confidence built only on their present misery. They would be apt to think that God did "respect persons," in the opposite fashion from that of a partial judge—namely, that He would incline the scale in favour of the ill-used, the poor, the down-trodden ; that they would have an easy test and a light sentence, while His frowns and His severity would be kept for the powerful and the rich who had ground the faces of the poor and kept back the hire of the labourer. It was therefore a needful reminder for them, and for us all, that that judgment has nothing to do with earthly condition, but only with conduct and character ; that sorrow and calamity here do not open heaven's gates hereafter, and that the slave and master are tried by the same law.

The series of precepts closes with a brief but most pregnant word to masters. They are bid to give to their slaves "that which is just and equal," that is to say, "equitable." A startling criterion for a master's duty to a slave who was denied to have any rights at all. They were chattels, not persons. A master might, in regard to them, do what he liked with his own ; he might crucify or torture, or commit any crime against manhood either in body or soul, and no voice would question or forbid. How astonished Roman lawgivers would have been if they could have heard Paul talking about justice and equity as applied to a slave ! What a strange new dialect it must have sounded to the slave-owners in the Colossian Church !

They would not see how far the principle, thus quietly introduced, was to carry succeeding ages; they could not dream of the great tree that was to spring from this tiny seed-precept; but no doubt the instinct which seldom fails an unjustly privileged class, would make them blindly dislike the exhortation, and feel as if they were getting out of their depth when they were bid to consider what was "right" and "equitable" in their dealings with their slaves.

He does not define what *is* "right and equal." That will come. The main thing is to drive home the conviction that there are duties owing to slaves, inferiors, employés. We are far enough from a satisfactory discharge of these yet; but, at any rate, everybody now admits the principle—and we have mainly to thank Christianity for that. Slowly the general conscience is coming to recognise that simple truth more and more clearly, and its application is becoming more decisive with each generation. There is much to be done before society is organized on that principle, but the time is coming—and till it is come, there will be no peace. All masters and employers of labour, in their mills and warehouses, are bid to base their relations to "hands" and servants on the one firm foundation of "justice." Paul does not say, Give your servants what is kind and patronising. He wants a great deal more than that. Charity likes to come in and supply the wants which would never have been felt had there been equity. An ounce of justice is sometimes worth a ton of charity.

This duty of the masters is enforced by the same thought which was to stimulate the servants to their tasks: "ye also have a Master in heaven." That is not only stimulus, but it is pattern. I said that Paul did not specify what was just and right, and that his precept might therefore be objected to as vague. Does the introduction of this thought of the master's Master in heaven, take away any of the vagueness? If Christ is our Master, then we are to look

to Him to see what a master ought to be, and to try to be masters like that. That is precise enough, is it not? That grips tight enough, does it not? Give your servants what you expect and need to get from Christ. If we try to live that commandment for twenty-four hours, it will probably not be its vagueness of which we complain.

“Ye have a Master in heaven,” is the great principle on which all Christian duty reposes. Christ’s command is my law, His will is supreme, His authority absolute, His example all-sufficient. My soul, my life, my all are His. My will is not my own. My possessions are not my own. My life is not my own. All duty is elevated into obedience to Him, and obedience to Him, utter and absolute, is dignity and freedom. We are Christ’s slaves, for He has bought us for Himself, by giving Himself for us. Let that great sacrifice win our heart’s love and our perfect submission. “O Lord, truly I am Thy servant, Thou hast loosed my bonds.” Then all earthly relationships will be fulfilled by us, and we shall move among men breathing blessing and raying out brightness, when in all, we remember that we have a Master in heaven, and do all our work from the soul as to Him and not to men.

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF HEINRICH EWALD.

II.—HIS WEAKNESS AND HIS STRENGTH, AS A CRITIC
AND AS A MAN.

COULD that true prophet who saw Israel’s past so much more clearly than his own life or his own time, have looked back with purged eyes on this point of his career, he might have taken up the words of a poet-prophet who went before him: “Midway the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark forest; for the straight way was lost.” Short