

Renewed Relationships by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th August 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Colossians 3:18-4:6; John 15:12-17

(not in lectionary)

Introduction

Imagine that a friend or family member sent you a message (text, e-mail, etc) saying that he or she had recently become a Christian.

How would you reply? What advice would you want to give?

I wonder also how would you pray for this person? What would you want God to do for them?

Colossians: a recap

This is the last in our series of sermons on St Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, a town which he had not visited himself, but where a church had been planted by one of Paul's protégés, Epaphras¹. Paul tells the Colossian Christians that he thanks God for them, and prays "that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:9-10 NRSV). You may notice in these verses our own church Purpose – to know God for ourselves, to grow as

¹ Colossians 1:4,7-8

individuals and as a church, and to show God's love in the world.

Paul reminds his readers at the beginning of the letter that Christianity is all about Christ – he's the image of the invisible God, everything was made through him, he is the head of the church, he is God incarnate, and through his death on the Cross God has worked to reconcile the world to himself². Paul warns the church against false teaching from people who want to persuade them to worship angels, to become Jews by being circumcised, or to follow certain religious practices. Listen, he says, Christ is all you need. Just remember that you have new life in him, and concentrate on growing closer to him³. And don't forget to live out your faith day by day, by getting rid of sinful and unhealthy behaviour and acting with compassion, humility, patience and love. And live thankfully in everything you do.⁴

Renewed relationships

So now Paul turns to relationships within the home and then with those who aren't Christians.

I'm guessing that you're probably fully in agreement with Paul up to this point. But now in today's passage we hit a couple of rather contentious areas in which Christianity has been criticised for being oppressive: teaching about the relationship between husbands and wives, and slavery. We all know that slavery is wrong, and the Church has been accused (with some justification) of condoning, or, at worst,

² Colossians 1:15-23

³ Colossians 2:6-23

⁴ Colossians 3:1-17

justifying slavery. Does this passage in Colossians condone slavery? And what about Paul telling wives to submit to their husbands? Really not very acceptable in these days of sexual equality.

I'm not going to pretend that this passage isn't challenging. But if we believe that God speaks to us through the Bible, then we need to find the right way to approach a passage like this. And one really important principle is to see it in context – both the social and historical context of the day and also the context of the rest of the letter to the Colossians, not to mention other teaching of Paul and of the New Testament, and, indeed, the whole Bible.

First, the social and historical context: urban society in the ancient world was hierarchical and patriarchal. In other words, authority rested in the hands of a minority of people who were rich and had political and economic power, and who controlled what everyone else did. And families were headed by men. Slavery was such an integral part of society and of the economy that it was considered completely normal, and in the Roman Empire around 20% of the population were slaves.⁵ Some slaves had positions of considerable responsibility within rich households, but the majority were involved with manual work; some were eventually able to obtain their freedom, but for the majority there was little chance of freedom, and the best that they could hope for was to be well treated by their owners. Slavery was a fact of life, part of the social and economic fabric of the world.

⁵ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/629/slavery-in-the-roman-world/>

In the family, the husband was the head, but the wife would have considerable authority in the home. In the days before modern contraception, the lives of most women were taken up with bearing and caring for children, and doing chores to keep the household going. In general, only wealthier women – those with slaves who would do the chores and the childcare – would have time and money for socialising and pursuing artistic or cultural interests.

By contrast, we are living in a world where living standards and attitudes have changed considerably in the past century, and in a culture that has been shaped by strong beliefs about equality, not only between the sexes but for minorities. We have the luxury of being able to criticise what was wrong in past generations and other societies.

The other important context is the rest of letter to the Colossians, and other biblical writings. How do Paul's instructions in this passage fit into his overall argument? And what would they have meant to the people he was writing to?

How Paul deals with slavery

Let's start with the issue of slavery. The first thing we should note is that, although Paul never calls for slavery to be abolished, which would have been inconceivable in that society, he makes a very radical point earlier in verse 11 of chapter 3, when he says that in Christ everyone is equal, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free. Similarly in his letter to the Galatians he writes "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you

are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁶ Rather than call for the overthrow of the social order, Paul shows how it can be transformed through faith in Christ.

One practical example is how Paul addresses the case of Onesimus, a run-away slave who belonged to a member of the church at Colossae called Philemon. The letter to the Colossians is being carried by Paul’s co-worker Tychicus together with Onesimus,⁷ whom Paul is sending back to Philemon with a personal letter, in which Paul describes Onesimus as “my son Onesimus”⁸ and says that he is sending him back “no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother.”⁹ He doesn’t tell Philemon what to do, and he even offers to compensate Philemon if Onesimus “has done you any wrong or owes you anything”. Clearly, he is not expecting Philemon to take him up on the offer, but he is implying that he expects Philemon to forgive Onesimus and treat him as a brother. Whether that would mean that Onesimus is given his freedom is hard to tell. But once Philemon recognised his former slave as a beloved brother in Christ, their relationship would be transformed.

Unequal power, equal responsibility

Let’s now look at the particular instructions which Paul gives to the Colossians with regard to relationships in the Christian household, i.e. relationships between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between masters and

⁶ Galatians 3:28 NIV

⁷ Colossians 4:7-9

⁸ Philemon verse 10

⁹ Philemon verse 16

slaves. Bishop Tom Wright points out in his commentary on Colossians that there are 3 relationships here where one party has power over the other: the husband has authority over the wife, the parents have authority over the children, and the masters have authority over the slaves. Paul proposes a Christian way of living out these relationships “so that the stronger parties have duties as well as rights, and those who are in a position of submission are treated as responsible human beings, with rights as well as duties.”¹⁰

Serving Christ

Let’s start with Paul’s instructions to slaves. He doesn’t say, “Being a slave is tough, but you just need to take it on the chin for Jesus”. No, he gives them a new way of looking at their work: “Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.”¹¹ In other words, he is asking them to do exactly what he told all his readers to do in verse 17: “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” And the masters are told, “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”¹² Incidentally, the word translated “fairly” can also be translated “equally”.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1986), p147

¹¹ Colossians 3:23-24 NRSV

¹² Colossians 4:1 NRSV

We no longer live in a world where owning slaves is considered normal, although we should be very aware that illegal slavery is still present, even in our own country. But we can apply the principles that Paul uses for masters and slaves to any workplace situation where some people have authority over others. Christian employers should model how to treat workers with fairness and equality, and Christians who work for others should adopt the same ethic that Paul encourages slaves to show. Working with integrity and commitment should be the mark of any Christian in the workplace. Doing your best as a way of serving Christ applies just as much in the office, shop or factory as it does in church.

Parents and children

What about children and parents? Isn't it interesting that Paul speaks directly to children in his letter, thereby according them dignity? Again, they are called to behave in a way that is "acceptable" or "pleasing" "in the Lord". And parents are warned not to "provoke" their children or they may "lose heart" or "become discouraged". The authority that parents have over their children is for the good of the children, and their emotional wellbeing must be paramount.

Marriage

So now we come to husbands and wives. Paul's words, which are quite brief here, are intended for the same purpose – that both parties treat each other in a way that reflects the kind of character that a Christian should display. As I said earlier, the norm in the ancient world was that the husband was head of the household. So the Christian wives

he is addressing are being asked to defer to their husbands as a *Christian* wife should do. And husbands are commanded to *love* their wives, “and never treat them harshly”. There is no question of bossing your wife around or treating her opinion as unimportant. You may remember that in last week’s passage Paul wrote “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”¹³. The word translated love is the Greek *agape* – love which is unconditional and self-giving. In a parallel passage in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that husbands should love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”.¹⁴ Here in Colossians he makes it quite clear that any form of abuse, whether verbal or physical, is totally incompatible with being a Christian. The phrase translated “never treat them harshly” literally means “don’t become bitter, or sharp, towards them”.

It's worth looking at that parallel passage in Ephesians chapter 5, where Paul elaborates on the behaviour of wives and husbands in more detail, using the analogy of the relationship between Christ and the Church. He summarises this in the following words: “Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.” We need to remember here Paul is talking about how our behaviour in relationships should reflect the highest Christian standards; he is not writing an essay about the differences between men and women.

¹³ Colossians 3:14 NRSV

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:25 NRSV

But I think that from the perspective of modern psychological understandings it is worth mentioning that people interpret whether someone loves or respects them in different ways. If I may venture to stick my neck out in this sensitive area, a *wife* needs to know that she is loved, and the best way for her husband to show her that, is to make it clear that he puts her first, copying the self-giving love of Christ. (I'd be interested to hear from wives whether they think I'm right!) A *husband* knows he is loved if his wife shows him respect. There is nothing more damaging to a man's self-esteem than when the woman he loves disrespects him. So although in a modern marriage we value an equal partnership rather than a hierarchy, I think Paul's emphasis on husbands showing love to their wives and wives showing respect to their husbands still has something to commend it.

Being a good witness

Treating others in a Christian way doesn't only apply in the family or workplace setting: in verses 5 and 6 Paul says that we should think about every contact we have with people who are not Christians. Every interaction is an opportunity to show God's grace in what we say, and to answer any questions or challenges to our faith with appropriate words. This is about how we behave towards people in all sorts of contexts – at work, in social settings, when shopping, and when making a complaint on the phone after you've had to wait for 45 minutes to be able to talk to a real human being (one of my bugbears!) What would it mean to “conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders” in these settings?

Conclusion

We've covered a lot of ground today. As we finish, could I invite you to reflect with me on the different relationships we have with family members; with people at work; with others outside the church as well as others inside it? Does the way we relate to others reflect the values of our Christian faith? Do we show respect, integrity, compassion, and affirmation to everyone? Is there any relationship that needs renewing in the light of Paul's teaching?

Let's take a moment to bring to God any relationship where we are falling short; any relationship that is strained; any person who could do with a little extra affirmation or encouragement from us.

Let's pray.