

## **Woodstock Methodist Church**

### **Sermon preached by Simeon Mitchell on 30 June 2019**

As part of 'Bible Month' on Colossians, Week 4

*Reading: Colossians 3:18-4:1*

My wife married a feminist... and is a passionate believer in equality. So while we chose the verses immediately before this passage as one of the readings at our wedding, there was no question of continuing to verse 18: *Wives, be subject to your husbands*. Because this verse has been misused so often over the years – mainly by men – to argue that women are secondary and need to do whatever their husbands demand. However abusive or violent or unsuited to leadership in a relationship the man might be.

This reflects one of the dangers of viewing the Bible as a moral code book where we can just take any individual verse that we find and tack on all of our assumptions about what it must mean. Then verses start to be used as proof texts for arguments that have no consistency with what God's story is even remotely about, and are more about backing up what we want them to say.

So, let's give ourselves some background to help us understand why Paul would say something like this. As we know, the story of Christianity is a remarkable story of God bringing life and love and salvation to the entire world. But that story unfolded during thousands of years of culture where women were barely seen as human, slaves were treated as animals, and your birth status would dictate your rights and chances in life. Sometimes, the Bible reflects this culture. But more often, it subverts it. God works through unlikely characters in unexpected places to bring a message which is all about liberation and a new way of living.

For example, God takes a lonely slave girl, Ruth, and puts this nobody at the centre of the story. She was an outsider, poorly treated, vulnerable to whatever her master wanted. Then her master died so she was at risk of getting tossed around from master to master. She's a puppet for other people. She has no dignity, no status. Then, by a miracle, someone takes pity on her, marries her, dignifies her, cares for her and gives her a child, and her child has a child and that child has a child and his name is David. King David. Ruth, an animal, a nobody, becomes a direct ancestor of Jesus.

It would have been pretty easy to skip over that part of the story. Besides, you don't put the woman's name in the genealogy at all anyway. She should have been cut out from the beginning, not had an entire book written about her. But she's there.

And it's not just an isolated example. Remember Rahab? She's a prostitute, and she's in the lineage as well.

In God's story, those who are rejected by society, who are marginalised in culture, often have a vital role to play. In fact, the best news in the story is *for* them. Step by step through the scriptures, we see more of this big picture of God's priorities. When we get to Jesus, these hints at the change God wants to see become impossible to ignore. "I come to bring good news to the poor," he proclaims, "and release to the oppressed." He spends his time associating with those who others forget and exploit, and announcing an upside-down kingdom where there will be abundant life for all. And then he pays the price for this life of radical inclusivity and reckless generosity that so threatens the powers that be.

Fifty years later, and the Jesus movement in Colossae - which Paul writes this letter to - is burgeoning, but in a culture that is still very much governed by the hierarchies of the Roman empire. Men were superior to their wives, slaves had to obey their masters, and children must defer to their parents.

That was just how it was. This pecking order denoted how everyone should live. The husbands will rule. The master's will prevails. This is how society interacted, this is how the world worked. You didn't ask questions, you kept quiet, and you let the great men do the talking and the ruling.

This however poses a problem to these new Christian communities. As Paul has been saying all along in Colossians, the church is to continue the mission that Jesus started, by modelling alternative ways of living, and this most certainly includes in their relationships. The church is to model a new creation, and new creation is completely different from the way of the Roman empire. Paul since the beginning of this letter has been making an argument that Christ should be central to culture. Just a few verses earlier, Paul says:

*In this renewal there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (3:11)*

It echoes a more familiar passage in his letter to the Galatians, which says:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)*

Paul is unapologetic and utterly consistent about this. He asserts over and over again that the kingdom of God works differently. It wreaks havoc on the normal way of doing relationships. Enough of these hierarchy-based categories. We are human and we are brothers and sisters in Christ and that is it. The rest of these structures, leave them to the empire, they are empty and will only lead to more destruction as they are not in Christ. In the kingdom, in Jesus, there is no difference between man and wife, Jew or Greek, slave or master... all are free and all are one in Christ. All.

So, when we get to the passage we're looking at today, Paul isn't throwing out everything he said before. He isn't ignoring the story that included Ruth and Rahab and Mary Magdalene. He isn't re-instituting a hierarchy of unhealthy relationships and contradicting all this 'one in Christ' talk. He's still talking about building the new ways among the ruins of the old ways. This passage was never meant to give anyone power over anyone else. **In fact, it's meant to do the opposite.** It's meant to encourage each person to *give* power to the other. The way a relationship needs to work, if it's to model self-renunciation and life-giving love. The way of Jesus.

The first phrase that should stand out to us is the second part of verse 18: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, *as is fitting to the Lord.*" We now know – as did the Colossian church – what is fitting to the Lord. It's all that stuff I've just been talking about. That line should debunk all ideas of control and hierarchy by itself. We know that giving up power and not taking it is always fitting to the Lord. What is fitting is that men and women are created equal and their relationships are a reflection of Christ's love for the church. We know that power, oppression and control in relationships is not the God-given direction. We know that God has redeemed relationships through Christ and that the church is to model this new way of living in these relationships.

So with this in mind, wives submit to your husbands, and husbands love your wives. This is what is known as a parallel passage. They are saying the same things. Paul is not giving men power and telling the women to do whatever he says. This isn't saying that the husband's will is the prevailing will. This is just reinstating how relationships should work. Love and submit, that's how it goes. We are to be a community of people whose relationships – not only marriages, by the way – are marked by love and submission.

As soon as you try and separate the two verses and use them to empower one side over the other side you've completely missed what Paul is doing and what God has been doing and the story that has been told all through the scriptures. This new way of doing relationships though doesn't stop with husbands and wives, it flows down into how children and parents interact.

Verses 20 and 21 are another pair of parallel verses. Since the beginning of time, parents were the bosses, they would tell their kids to do something and they would do it. Children were seen as lesser beings, just waiting to grow up and be meaningful contributors to society and actually become fully

human. But then it looks like Paul is saying that even these relationships are being subverted. No longer is one the superior of another, but it looks like there is a mutual submission going on here. Fathers are told not to dishearten or discourage their children. There is actually a relationship that is happening that both sides need to be mindful of, as opposed to one party just telling the other what to do.

Paul's on a roll now, and he just keeps going. Masters and slaves, two more parallel verses. Masters be fair, servants work wholeheartedly. Paul is not just advocating for people to get along, he's advocating for people who were once in oppressive, authoritarian relationships to actually think about the other when they make a decision.

And just when you think it couldn't get any more unsettling, he drops in the point that actually, you're *all* servants of a heavenly master – so this instruction to slaves applies to *all* of you!

In fact, buried in the penultimate verse of this passage, whose specific instructions have so often been taken out of context and misconstrued, are a few words that *do* contain Paul's message in a nutshell, and they are these: **there is no partiality**. God has no favourites. The implication being – you shouldn't, either.

This passage is not creating rules for how marriages and parents should set up their power structures. This passage is saying that those patterns of hierarchy don't work in the kingdom, so no matter what "title" you have in the world - male, female, slave, master, parent, child - that doesn't automatically make you powerful, respected or worth being submitted to. Rather, the kingdom works completely differently. It refuses to see labels and rather sees people. The church should mirror this. Not play power games, and not acquiesce in the labels of power that already exist.

This instruction is as true for us today as it is for the church at Collosae. We still live in a culture where too often status and deference and privilege are given to the already-powerful. Where if you are female, or black, or working class, or gay, or young, you have many more barriers to overcome than someone who is not.

Empire is still all around us, and we still need to work out how to subvert it and live the values of God's kingdom while it persists. Paul's message in this passage is that we can start right here, with our relationships. In our homes. In our marriages or other forms of partnership. In our workplaces.

However, we can't just stop here anymore. Because we live in a global economy. We are connected to people we have never met. Paul talks about slaves. As I don't imagine any of us has a slave that lives in our house, we might think that a lot of what Paul is saying here doesn't apply to us at all. However, there are over 32 million people living in slavery conditions around the world today: whether bonded labourers, or trapped in exploitative relationships, or working in sweatshop factories.

This is how the author Naomi Klein describes the life of many of these factory workers:

*"Regardless of where these factories are located, the workers' stories have a certain mesmerizing sameness: the workday is long – fourteen hours in Sri Lanka, twelve hours in Indonesia, sixteen in Southern China, twelve in the Philippines. The vast majority of the workers are women, always young, always working for subcontractors from Korea, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. The contractors are usually filling orders for companies based in the U.S., Britain, Japan, Germany or Canada. The management is military style, the supervisors often abusive, the wages below subsistence, the work low skill and tedious."*

All of us are part of this slavery. Much of the clothing, electronics, housewares and food we buy will be produced with an element of slave labour somewhere in the supply chain. Production of many products has been outsourced to countries where there are few enforced labour or environmental laws, in order that companies can respond to the demand for ever-cheaper products while remaining competitive and still generating profits. It's why every large corporation now has to have a modern

slavery statement on its website. It doesn't mean it's eliminated slavery, rather that it acknowledges it and is trying to do something about it.

We are involved in this. We are responsible. Every time we step into a store or go online and buy products that come from these sweatshops, and we are excited about the price or how great it looks, we've then joined the cycle and have made these sweatshop workers our slaves. Every time we buy coffee or tea or chocolate or bananas that aren't fairly traded, we've made those workers our slaves.

This reality can be overwhelming. It is overwhelming to be told to treat our slaves right and fair, because we don't know them. But Paul is calling us, as he called the Colossians, to be an alternative community who can imagine and dream together about what living differently means.

It will involve making different choices. Different from those we've made in the past, and different from those made by others. And this is not disconnected from the other instructions in the passage. As we try and model equality in our closest and most intimate relationships, where there is nowhere to hide, we will begin to live our way into a new way of being and thinking where we accept we are no better than any other. If we invest time in the quality of the relationships we have with the children in our lives, they will be better able to resist when they start getting targeted as consumers – through the media and peer pressure – to buy products that are made in sweatshops. And so we will begin to disrupt the cycle and the culture of empire.

This passage, then, is no sop to the establishment; not, as it might first seem, advice to church members to keep your heads down by doing as everyone else does. These are words that are as subversive as the gospel and as challenging as any of Paul's teachings. They demand that we no longer see people by their labels, but as being all in it together, all one in Christ, all having value in Christ. When we actually believe that and start living that practically, everything has to change. For that is the way of God's boundless love.

Perhaps, if I could have been sure that everyone would have gone away with this understanding, I might have had these verses at my wedding after all! But I think I would need to defer to my wife on that decision.