

I grew up in a vibrant church community. We were blessed with a large young adults' group in our church. So we talked among ourselves about the Bible and how it applied to our lives. One phrase generated a lot of discussion. "Wives, submit to your husbands."

Among my friend group, I don't think we seriously thought about that phrase. I think we used it more as a joke where the guys would remind the girls that this was in the Bible. The girls would have clever comebacks to the guys. We didn't think about how this verse was lived out within a marriage. Then Lori and I got married. We had to make the usual adjustments that come in the early years. But I can't remember this verse coming up a lot in our marriage. Then we moved to a new church. We soon discovered that a couple there faced serious marital difficulties that included abuse.

I was suddenly trying to minister to them. The verse "Wives submit to your husbands" was no longer a joke. It was no longer just some theoretical discussion. This was a real situation. It did not make sense to me to tell an abused wife to go and submit to her husband. So began a 30+ year journey of trying to figure out what this verse means in practice?

We come to it in our Colossians study today. I recognize "Wives, submit to your husbands," goes completely against our culture. Many see it as a relic of the past that needs to be discarded or dismissed if the church wants to remain relevant. A verse like this tests our view of Scripture. Do we believe everything the Bible asserts is true? Do we believe it must be followed regardless of our emotional likes, cultural customs or popular opinion? Or do we think we need to modernize, correct, or ignore it? Verses like this are a challenge because of the misuse of them to justify abuse or harsh treatment.

So how do we deal with it? How do we come to terms with it? I realize I am a guy. I am a husband. Though I can try to imagine what it is like to hear this passage as a female, I am not a female. Now I do have 2 daughters and a wife. They have helped me gain some perspective. I asked Lori again for her perspective on this a couple weeks ago. She had some helpful things to say that I have woven into this message. But I still don't know what it actually feels like to be in the skin of a woman and hear this

command. So I thought I would invite a female many of you know or at least recognize to talk about this with us today. She is our Music Teams Director, Kaelyn Hamm. Lori and I had the privilege of walking with Dan and Kaelyn through their pre-marital counseling. Then I had the privilege of officiating at their wedding over 4 years ago. I thought it might be helpful for you to hear from Kaelyn about her journey with respect to a verse like this.

- Could you tell us a little bit about your spiritual journey with Christ. Tell us about your upbringing and your family?
- So you've grown up in some different churches. You ended up here when you were about Grade 5. You kind of grew up here. You met your husband to be here. You got married here. You've been to University at MacEwan in downtown Edmonton. So you've interacted with people from different walks of life and belief systems. A verse like Colossians 3:18 is totally countercultural to our world today. So when you guys decided to go ahead with marriage, you knew you would be taking on this role of wife.
- Would you share some of what you went through in processing a verse like this?
- What do you think are some of the misapplications of this verse that can make it more difficult especially for women?
- Where are you at today with a verse like this?
- Thank you, Kaelyn for sharing with us today.

So now we're going to look at this passage. Colossians 3:17-19. Page 836 in the Bibles here. We will read the passage. Then I will give you six factors that will help give some context to verses 18 and 19. Then we will look at the command to both wives and husbands.

### **Colossians 3:17-19**

<sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

<sup>18</sup> Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. <sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

### **6 Factors that help give context to Colossians 3:18-19**

**1 – God created both males and females in His image (Genesis 1:26-27; 1 Peter 2:9).** Some have taken a verse like this and used it claim that husbands are spiritually superior to their wives in the eyes of God. Some may even say things like “the husband is the priest over the home.” But this is not backed up by Scripture.

So let's go back to the beginning in the first chapter of the Bible. God creates the first man and woman. And listen carefully to what He says about them. Genesis 1:26-27. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'" So males and females bear God's image. It's not like God gave males 100% of His image and females 80% or 50%. Both are image bearers of God.

In the New Testament, husbands are not raised up as priests over their homes above everyone else. God certainly calls them to take on responsibility over their home and families. But in 1 Peter 2:9, we see every believer is part of the royal priesthood under God. "But you – are a chosen race, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who call you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Paul himself writes in Galatians 3:27-28 – "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." So God created both males and females in His image. Men and women are spiritually equal before God.

**2 – Both man and woman rebelled against God in the garden resulting in a curse on their relationship (Genesis 3:1-19).** You know the story. The serpent who was the devil comes along to Eve and raises doubts about God's character. She responds to the devil's temptation by eating the forbidden fruit. Of course, insensitive chauvinistic guys will say "it's all Eve's fault that we're in this mess." Yet Adam was right there and fully participated in this act of disobedience. Immediately their relationship with God and each other experiences fracture. The Lord God comes along to meet them. They hide from Him. Then when He asks what happened they start the blame game.

This ultimately results in a curse on each one involved in this rebellion, the Serpent, Adam and Eve. Genesis 3:16 diagnoses the struggle all face in marriage. Genesis 3:16 – To the woman God said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." That last sentence describes the curse on

marriage. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband.” The wife’s contrary desire likely refers to a competitive spirit with her husband. She will naturally want to go against him. He responds with harsh rule. “He shall rule over you” is not something God affirms. It is the sinful response of the husband. He will rule harshly in an exploitive way over his wife.

Tim and Kathy Keller comment on this in their book “The meaning of marriage.” *“In Genesis 3, both man and woman sin against God and are expelled from the Garden of Eden. We immediately see the catastrophic change in the unity between man and woman. The air is filled with blame shifting, finger pointing and accusation. Rather than their Otherness becoming a source of completion, it becomes an occasion for oppression and exploitation. One of the results of sin is that husbands will seek to tyrannize their wives and women in general.”*<sup>1</sup> This leads to factor 3.

**3 – Married people throughout history must struggle to overcome this curse.** Married people who follow God also struggle. That explains the many dysfunctional and troubling things we see in marriages especially in the Old Testament. Husbands mistreat their wives and rule them harshly. Some wives try to manipulate things to outmaneuver their husbands. So we must not look at marriages in the Old Testament as perfect models to imitate. They portray the effects of the curse upon marriages. They point to our need to depend on the Lord to overcome them.

**4 – Jesus turned common understanding of authority and submission upside down through His life and teaching.** In Jesus’ time, authority was exercised with the top-down approach. The one with authority told everyone else what to do and expected unquestioning obedience. The Roman emperor, officers, business owners and husbands practiced this approach to authority. They expected obedience. They seldom showed respect or concern for those they ruled over. Submission was shameful. If you had to submit, it revealed your low status.

But Jesus turns this all upside down. He will teach the disciples a new understanding of authority and submission. Mark 10:42-45 is a great example. “And Jesus called them to him and said to them,

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: A couple’s devotional*, Viking, 2011, 2019, 285.

‘You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’” So Jesus introduces the concept of servant-leader and then demonstrates it with His own life.

Jesus also shows that a healthy submission can be honoring and glorious and degrading to the one who submits. He does this in relationship to His Father with whom Jesus is spiritually equal. Throughout the Gospel of John, we see the clearest case for Jesus’ equality with His Father. John 1:1 – In the beginning was the Word (Jesus) and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” So He was distinct from God but He was also God. He was equal to God the Father.

Yet Jesus emphasizes throughout John that He has come to do the will of His Father. John 6:38 says, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” Philippians 2:8 says, “Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus turned the world’s understanding of authority and submission upside down with His life and teaching.

**5 – First century pagan culture practiced widespread male authority and female submission with no consideration of equality.** Sometimes, people present the Bible as if the church is only ancient community that insisted wives submit to their husbands. So you’ve got the repressive Christian husband ruling over his wife in their home. Then over here the enlightened Romans and Greeks walked around with total equality in their homes.

But that is a misconception. Rome saw the family as the foundational block of their empire. Since the Romans were all about maintaining control over the empire, they emphasized the husband’s control and authority over the home. He exercised authority down and expected that he would be obeyed without question. There was no equality of all people under Caesar. But there was equality of all people under Christ.

**6 – These commands have a distinctively Christian flavor.** One argument put forward to dismiss these commands goes something like this. “The culture of the day practiced male authority and female submission. So, Paul is just counseling Christians to follow the culture’s practice to ensure that Christianity didn’t get stamped out as too radical.”

But these commands must be read within the context of husbands and wives being spiritually equal under Christ. Unlike the culture of that day, these commands show concern for the weaker party. In Colossians 3:18-4:2, we will see concern shown for wives, children and slaves. This was unheard of in that culture. Notice as well, these commands come immediately after the statement “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” So these commands are governed by concern for the wife and a desire to give glory to God.

With this history and context in mind, we can consider these commands. **Wives submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.** The word submit refers to a willingness to put oneself under the authority of another. It is a willingness to abide by the will of another. The author Paul writes the word submit in a way that the subject does the action with respect to themselves. So it could be translate “wives submit yourselves to your husbands.” Just as Jesus voluntarily submitted Himself to His Father’s will, a wife embraces that command in her marriage. But this in no way means she becomes a doormat or has no say.

It also does not mean that she must submit to something sinful. I’m going to quote Tim and Kathy Keller here again from their book “The meaning of marriage.” *No human being should give any other human being unconditional obedience. As Peter said, “We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29).” A wife should not obey or aid a husband in doing things that God forbids, such as selling drugs or physically abusing her. If he beats her, the strong help that a wife should exercise is to love and forgive him in her heart but have him arrested. It is never kind or loving to anyone to make it easy for him or her to do wrong.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy and Kathy Keller, 304.

Notice also the contrast here to children in verse 20 and bondservants in verse 22, Paul does not command wives to obey their husbands. It's a voluntary submission. Think about how that reverses the curse. Remember Genesis 3:16 – "Your desire shall be contrary to your husband." Contrariness leads to strife. How different things might turn out if a wife voluntarily submits to their husband. To submit also means to recognize a relationship of order established by God. The second half of the phrase – "as is fitting to the Lord." To submit in this way is to adopt the posture of Jesus towards His Father.

But then comes the next command which is much less known than "wives submit to your husbands." **Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them (Colossians 3:19).** Now to us, that seems like an obvious command. That's just what you do. Not in Roman culture. Husbands ruled their wives and children. Husbands often married for economic or political reasons. This match would advance their careers or wealth. So it was common practice for Roman and Greek husbands to love women other than their wives.

But this was not to be the case in Christian homes. Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Or do not be embittered towards their wives. Husbands, do we think we are justified in harshness or bitterness towards our wives? Do we think that because we're under stress, we deserve to unload on our wives? Absolutely not. I remember overhearing a conversation once. A husband received a call from his wife about some issue at home. The husband treated the wife as an irritating interruption. He completely dismissing her concerns. Such harshness is forbidden by God. Husbands need to repent of any harshness towards their wives.

Paul actually demands much from husbands in the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:22-33. Yes, wives are to submit to husbands and respect them. But husbands are required to love their wives as Christ loved the church. They must be willing to lay down their lives for their wives. They must care for their wives as they care for their own bodies. They must cherish their wives. They must prioritize their wives by leaving their father and mother and becoming one flesh with their wife. So any husband who quotes "wife submit to me" while neglecting his own massive responsibilities in marriage needs to repent.

Notice also that “Husbands love your wives” reverses the curse of a husband haughty ruling over his wife.

One commentator writes “No other code from the ancient world that we have discovered requires husbands to love their wives.” But God requires it and commands it. When a husband takes their responsibilities seriously and lives them out by God’s empowerment, it greatly increases the likelihood of a harmonious marriage.

Now, we have just scratched the surface of this topic. And I would invite you to join the next group discussion upstairs after the worship service to explore this further. But this brings this home today, I invite us to step back from these commands and look at the bigger picture of Colossians.

Paul wrote that we must put on the new self that we received because of Christ’s sacrifice for us. This new self involves authentic Spirit-empowered Christian living. To live authentic Christian lives, we must adopt Christ’s new ways of thinking. I invite you today to ask God if there is any area of your thinking specifically about this issue, that needs His renewing work? Is there any sexism in your thoughts? Do you think the opposite gender is inferior to yours in some way? Is there something you do in marriage or a relationship that causes strife rather than harmony? Is there some attitude that God has pointed out that needs changing? Or is there some wisdom you need to deepen the closeness and harmony in your relationship or family? Let’s invite the Lord to speak to us and then for courage to act on whatever He says. Then I will close our time in prayer.