

Colossians 3 vs 18 - 4 v1

Here's something you'll never hear on the BBC! 'Wives submit to your husbands'. Their mantra of empowerment to women would definitely preclude it! Despite their low status in the world of the Colossians, God's word tells us that women and men are equal. No one gender is better than the other. Gen 1 v 27-28 tells us that mankind (i.e. males and females) was created in God's image. We have the same qualities. Mainly due to media bias and secular pressure we often overlook that we actually have more similarities than we do differences! The whole area is a minefield and there will be women who have been abused by men and women who have been overlooked for promotion in favour of men.

But the context of this verse is within marriage. Gender wars within marriage are hardly going to be conducive to harmony! The context also makes reference to the relationship the wife and the husband have with Christ. (..as is fitting with the Lord. v 18)

Paul expands on his views of the ideal Christian marriage in his letter to the Ephesians (5 vs 21-23) but he precedes it with this statement. 'Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ'. Mutual willing submission to each other is God's ideal. While the authority within marriage lies with the husband, he is to treat his wife like Christ treats the church (Eph 5 v 25). Husbands love your wives doesn't mean buy her flowers now and then! It means that in the same way as Christ was prepared to die for the church, love your wife likewise! What problem could any wife have with submitting to someone who cares for them, loves them above everything else and always has their best interests at heart? This is no different from how any Christian submits to Christ.

This kind of love will of course prevent the likelihood of the verbal abuse warned against in v19 but as we've already seen we still battle against the old self.

In the Old Testament sacrifices were made at the altar - a reminder to all married couples!

Like verses 18-19, verses 20-21 demand a reciprocal approach! If children want to please the Lord then they should obey their parents. Parents have God given responsibility to bring up children which involves teaching them and telling them what to do and what not to do. This will inevitably involve discipline. Kids, it's good for you! Check out Heb 12 v 9! Parents, fathers in particular (because they, Biblically, have the responsibility for their children) are not to embitter their children with nagging, deriding or destroying their self-respect.

In the eyes of a child love is spelt T-I-M-E. Having seen some of the articles in the newsletter, it's clear many of our children are getting plenty of both. Lots of crafts, cooking and baking seems to be going on. (P.S. Where do you get your flour??!!)

The motivation for all our attitudes, whether it be between spouses or between parents and children, is revealed at the start of these verses. We are doing it all not for our husband, wife, child or parent but for the Lord (v23)

'It is the Lord Christ you are serving' (v24)

Colossians 3 v22 - 4v1

I owe, I owe. It's off to work I go!

The teaching in this passage is meant to apply to the worker (slave) and employer (master) of today. Paul neither condones nor condemns slavery but addresses the attitudes involved. We often think of slaves as people who are harshly treated and unhappy but many slaves in the times of the Colossians were content working for fair masters.

The key to Paul's teaching for both slaves and masters is who it's being done for! Are we as workers only doing a good job when being watched? (Ofsted comes to mind) Employers can't see everything all the time but God can! Whatever we are doing we are told to work at it with all our hearts and do the best we possibly can all the time. Why? Because we are doing it for the Lord who put us in that employment or situation in the first place!

Here's a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

'If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say: Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well'

Wouldn't it remove some of the drudgery of work if we imagined such an image instead of thinking, 'My boss never takes any notice of me'.

Here's another less helpful and worldier quote.

'If you're not fired with enthusiasm, you will be fired with enthusiasm' (Think Alan Sugar)

Paul then turns his attention to masters. Employers need to treat their employees fairly. This means paying a decent wage and treating them as people and not machines. He doesn't tell the masters to set the slaves free but to treat them fairly. Paul reinforces this with a reminder that the reason for this is because ultimately they will give account to their Master in heaven.

Whether employer or employee the teaching that should dominate our thinking and our actions is, 'It is the Lord Christ you are serving'. (v24)

Without Christ employees and employers will conform to the standards of the world i.e. me, me, me! Christians are to be different. Peter and John were just ordinary working fishermen but their lives were transformed because 'they had been with Jesus' (Acts 4v13). We need to spend time with Christ.

Colossians 4 vs 2-3

To devote means to give all or most of one's time to something or someone. (e.g. I am devoted to my wife. Anonymous quote!!)

To apply this to prayer is no easy task in our busy lives. In fact Don Carson has compared much of modern prayer to being like the naughty child who rings the doorbell then runs off before anyone answers!

Paul is urging a way of life that includes prayerfulness as a constant. I have always been impressed with Nehemiah's example on this. He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes and told the king he was sad because Jerusalem was in ruins. The king asked him what he wanted to do. At this point Nehemiah prayed then answered him telling him that he wanted to rebuild Jerusalem.

I was once asked a direct question by the Duke of Edinburgh who had the Queen by his side at the time!! As you can imagine, out of sheer awe and respect I didn't hang about, I gave an answer straight away!!

Nehemiah had that constant prayerful attitude and would have the presence of mind to send an 'arrow prayer' due to other times spent in deeper more extended prayer.

We are to be watchful or alert. Possibly for the answers God may give to our prayers. We easily fall into the trap of doing all the talking and not enough listening to the Holy Spirit when we pray.

'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (Mark 14 v 38). Jesus also warned his disciples against neglecting prayer. Constant prayerfulness and not falling asleep to Jesus's presence with us will help us to avoid temptation.

Paul has already mentioned the need to develop an attitude of gratitude! (Col 3 v 16&17). George Bernard Shaw said, 'Most people do not pray; they only beg'. Praise and thanks must be a large part of our communication with God.

Paul is speaking to the Colossians in the plural. For now, we have largely lost the ability to pray together as a group so this is an ideal time to develop personal prayer. 'Go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father who is unseen'. (Jesus's words in Mat 6 v 6) The puritans advice on prayer was to 'pray until you pray'! We need to get past the formalities and shun the temptation to get on with other things. We must go deeper in prayer, praising and thanking God and listening with our hearts.

'When you pray, rather let your heart be without words than your words without heart'.
John Bunyan.

Colossians 4 vs 5-6

'He determined the times set for them (people of the world) and the exact places where they should live'. (Acts 17v26). God has placed us in the places and situations that we are in and he wants us to share the gospel with those around us.

In these verses he shares how we should go about that task. He doesn't say it but we can infer from his own situation that it will take courage. What a change has happened to Paul!! A man who previously displayed hatred and cruelty to Christians now speaks of graciousness to all. We may not all have his gift of evangelism but we can take example from his courage in the face of floggings and imprisonment. Mockery and ridicule would have been part of his everyday life!

'Courage is being scared to death....and still saddling up!' (John Wayne).

'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders'. (v5)

Paul has spent the best part of chapter 3 teaching us this wisdom! Putting certain things on and taking certain things off. Our actions and our words reveal our true character and this must be a revelation of Christ through us if we are to be good witnesses for him. Are we an advert for Christ?

'Make the most of every opportunity' (v5).

We often pray for opportunities to tell people about Jesus but are we watchful (v2), looking carefully for the slightest opportunity to swing the conversation around to Jesus? Births, deaths and news headlines are such opportunities. Death is always with us but more of a talking point now than ever! We will be out clapping (or in Phil's case, sounding horns!) for the NHS this evening in their fight to prevent deaths from Covid. Those spared are a cause for celebration but they too will still die! How I wish we were clapping all those preachers, evangelists, missionaries and ordinary you and I's who are trying to prevent eternal death outside of Christ!!

Paul tells us how to speak when we get those opportunities. Unfortunately, Christianity, in the minds of many, is connected with a kind of sanctimonious dullness and an outlook where laughter is almost heresy! As salt gives flavour to food so should our wit give flavour to our speech. We must speak with gracious charm and consider what we say with due empathy for the listener. 'Know how to answer everyone' (v6) not only implies learning what to say and practising it but also recognising where each listener is coming from and applying what we say appropriately. Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church says, 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Cor 9 v 22).

Re-read verses 2-6. Do you notice the two main topics? Prayer and evangelism! Praise God for 2019, which for us at Measham, was greatly blessed with both! Looking forward, pray for more of the same.

Colossians 4 v 7-11

In days before texts, emails or even the post, letters were delivered by hand. Paul is a prisoner in Rome, busy writing his letters and is relying on Tychicus to take this one and give news to the church in Colossae. (Over 2000 km away).

There are examples of forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and the sovereignty of God hidden in these greetings.

Onesimus will be travelling with Tychicus. In Paul's gem of a letter to his friend Philemon (found just before the book Hebrews) we learn more about him. He was a slave to Philemon (also a Colossian) but has stolen from him and run away eventually ending up in Rome. Paul in his letter to him, urges Philemon to take him back, not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. How amazing that Paul should meet up with Onesimus in this vast city (and possibly led him to the Lord). Coincidence or Godincidence?

In the slave culture of the time (see footnote) Philemon could have had Onesimus severely punished but Paul knows Philemon, is convinced of his faith and is confident that he will forgive him. He also offers to pay any costs Philemon has incurred as a result of Onesimus running away.

Christ has forgiven us and has paid the cost of our sin with his own life!

Aristarchus was Paul's travelling companion on his third missionary journey. He was possibly in prison for his own faith but he could have accompanied Paul out of loyalty. Prisoners of Paul's standing were allowed 2 slaves in prison with them! What an example of how far we should be prepared to go to support someone who is preaching the gospel. Two other Jews send greetings. Jesus also called Justus about whom little is known and Mark the cousin of Barnabas. On a previous one of Paul's missions Mark had unexplainably returned to Jerusalem rather than carry on with the work. This led Paul to refuse to take him on another journey (Acts 15 vs 36-41). Clearly Paul here now has been practicing what he preached. Mark and he seem to be on friendly terms again. Paul has forgiven him, is working alongside him and Paul says he is a comfort to him. (See also 2 Tim 4v11)

In these and the following verses we see that Mark, Luke and Paul are all in prison in Rome. Between them they wrote over half of the books in the New Testament! These were ordinary men, changed by God and used by God to change the world. We must never underestimate the potential of God's power in us ordinary people to do great things for his cause! Five loaves and two fish went a long way in the hands of Jesus.

Footnote

Coincidentally, on this day in 1873 David Livingstone died in Zambia. He did much to kick start the abolition of slavery. He died from malaria, a treatable and preventable disease that kills one child every 2 mins! Deaths from malaria this year are set to rise to 770,000 in sub Saharan Africa alone as resources are redirected to fighting Coronavirus which has killed around 230,000 globally so far! Makes you think!!

Colossians 4 vs12-16

I want to concentrate on two characters in this passage.

Epaphras sends his greetings to his home church. He is clearly a prayer warrior. His prayers are specific and fervent. Paul uses the phrase, 'wrestling in prayer'. It makes us think of a fight where each of the participants wants to come out on top and victorious. Epaphras will not give up until his prayers are successfully answered. These prayers mean a lot to him.

He doesn't treat God in the way that C.S. Lewis recognises in this quote. 'We regard God as an airman regards his parachute; it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it'.

Paul probably has in mind the story of Jacob wrestling with a man all night and refused to give in until the man blessed him. The man turned out to be God in human form and from then on God renamed Jacob as Israel! (Gen 32 vs 22-32).

His prayers are in the will of God. He prays for the believers in Colossae to be sure of their faith, to stand strong in it and to mature!

Are we engaged in such prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ!

Epaphras was also a man of action. He was converted in Ephesus but returned to his home town Colossae and founded the church there. Paul says, '...he is working for you..' (v13). Some people pray and don't act, some act and don't pray. Epaphras was neither. He was prepared to get his hands AND his knees dirty!
(Incidentally, did you know God always answers a knee mail)

Paul mentions someone called Nympha in verse 15. Not much is said about her other than that she has a church in her house! It is unusual in the male dominated culture of the time that it was called 'her' house. She may have been single, divorced or widowed. Or she may just have been the head of the house! More interesting is that she had a church in her house. A special building wasn't necessary as the church (i.e. the people) met in her own building.

Many churches today are consumed by building related issues and other trivial practicalities. Prayer and evangelism become secondary. The church that Epaphras founded and prayed for, in which Nympha played her part, was dedicated to teaching, prayer and spreading the gospel.

I hope we have the balance right at Measham. It's not always been the case. Are we too satisfied with mediocre prayer times and mediocre witnessing? We need the constant reminder of chapter 3 vs 2. 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things!'

'True prayer is neither a mere mental exercise nor a vocal performance. It is deeper than that. It is a spiritual transaction with the Creator of Heaven and Earth'. C.H Spurgeon.

Colossians 4 v 17

This is the final part of Paul's letter but he ends with a theme consistent with many of his other letters! 'Finish the race' (see also 1 Cor. 9 v 20-27)

Two characters compare in this verse and verse 14. Archippus (who was part of Philemon's household) and Demas.

Archippus is charged with completing the work he had received in the Lord. We don't know what that work was. It may have been a lifelong commitment to serve the Lord or it may have been a specific task with a beginning and an end. Either way, the important thing is to see it through to its completion as a marathon runner sticks at it until he or she gets to the 26.2188 mile mark! Then he can rest! We will all enter a rest one day (Heb. 4 v9-11) but it's worth remembering that we may have reached a point of completion for a specific task already! We may be wrong in thinking that we must continue in what we've always done. It may be that we have done our bit and we need to step down and let someone else take the mantle. Conversely, it may be that we just need to keep going, even if we might have 'hit the wall'! God will let us know which is right for us.

We read in Timothy 4 v 10 that Demas was tempted away from the work by a love for the world. There are many ways we can be sidetracked from our work for Jesus. We can get physically tired and just stop, angry and quit, fall morally or just let things slide! Spurgeon warns us to look around, within and below for the things that may drag us away from dedication to Jesus.

Despite the agony of Gethsemane and the physical exhaustion of his last days Christ did not give up. Paul looked forward to his 'crown of righteousness' (2 Tim 4 v 7-8) as he finished his race. There is one waiting for all of us who enter the race and persevere to the end.

We started our readings in Colossians almost 6 weeks ago and it has been a blessing to me to see how Jesus dominates the pages of this letter. (Actually, it is possible to find Jesus in any book of the Bible if we look hard enough).

This book was written to people who were being influenced by philosophies and cults that were pulling them away from Christ. In his letter Paul reminds the people of Colossae that Christ is all they need.

In summary refer back to Chapter 2 v 7. 'Built up in him'.

- Building downward. Rooted in Jesus (2 v 7 and 1 v 23)
- Building upward. Towards Christlikeness. (2 v 7 and Phil 1 v 6)
- Building inward. Putting off the old. (3 v 5-9). Putting on the new. (3 v 12-14)
- Building outward. Our witness to others. (4 v 5-6)

'When you run the marathon, you run against the distance, not against the other runners and not against the time'. Haile Gebrselassie.

'Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus' Heb. 12 v 2