

**The Christian Family**  
**Colossians 3:18-19**  
by R. Kent Hughes

We have considered the cosmic fullness of Christ who created and presently sustains the universe by His power. We have also examined the implications of his fullness for every area of life. Now we will look at the *domestic fullness* of Christ. In the earlier studies we saw the cosmic, supra-mundane; here all is domestic and totally mundane. We move from the religion of the universe to the religion of the kitchen and bedroom. Since Christ is the fullness of the universe, he must also be the source of fullness in the home.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 could well be titled, “How to Have a Full, Rich Family Life.” The text contains three sets of exhortations: verses 18 and 19 to wives and husbands, verses 20 and 21 to children and parents, 3:22-4:1 to servants and masters.

Colossians 3:18, 19 is patently domestic. It has to do with *home*, specifically a Christian home. Moreover, it has to do with the relationship between a *Christian* husband and a *Christian* wife. As such, it has nothing to say about men’s and women’s roles in society, such as the marketplace or politics. There are other texts which give us some guidance in these areas, but we do Scripture a great disservice by applying it where it was never intended. The teaching here is for Christians who want to live as Christians within the home and experience all the fullness God intended for them. It is teaching which is much needed today when marriage has fallen into disrepute, as with the seven-year-old girl who had just seen the movie *Cinderella* and was testing her neighbor lady’s knowledge of the story. The neighbor, anxious to impress the little girl, said, “I know what happens at the end.” “What?” asked the girl. “Cinderella and the prince live happily ever after.” To which the little girl answered, “Oh no, they didn’t. They got married!” It was totally innocent, unwitting cynicism. But others are more calculated, like the famous literary figure William Congreve who wrote, “Every man plays the fool once in his life, but to marry is playing the fool all of one’s life.”<sup>1</sup>

**Fullness in Marriage (vv. 18,19)**

These Scriptures are *radically elevating*. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” This contrasts with the plight of women in the ancient world. William Barclay writes:

Under Jewish law a woman was a thing; she was the possession of her husband, just as much as his house or his flocks or his material goods were. She had no legal right whatever. For instance, under Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife for any cause, while a wife had no rights whatever in the initiation or divorce. In Greek society a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She never appeared on the streets alone, not even to go marketing. She lived in the women’s apartments and did not join her menfolk even for meals. From her there was demanded a complete servitude and chastity; but her husband could go out as much as he chose, and could enter in as many relationships outside marriage as he liked and incur no stigma. Both under Jewish and under Greek laws and custom, all the privileges belonged to the husband, and all the duties to the wife.<sup>2</sup>

The domestic rules given here in Colossians were vastly different from those of the day. Wives here were addressed equally with their husbands, something radically new. Also, both husbands and wives had duties—not just the wives.<sup>3</sup> They were both admonished “in the Lord.” The context of this phrase begins in verse 17, which makes it clear that the totality of their lives was to be regulated by it. This brought a vast dignity to both men and women.<sup>4</sup> They were both under the Lordship of Christ as equals. All of this was immensely elevating to women and would raise their positions greatly in the ancient and modern world.

At the same time, within that marital relationship these words established a definite *hierarchy*. As F.F. Bruce says, Paul “does hold that there is a divine instituted hierarchy in the order of creation, and in this order the place of the wife come next after her husband.”<sup>5</sup> However, this does not suggest (here or anywhere else in Scripture) that the wife is naturally or spiritually inferior to the husband, or vice versa. There is a hierarchy in the Holy Trinity, and yet equality. Orthodoxy teaches that the Son is simultaneously *equal* to the Father and *submissive* to him. Likewise, *equality* and *submissiveness* can coexist in human relationships, including the marriage relationship.

### **Fullness Through the Wife (v. 18)**

Christ’s word to the woman in the Christian home is: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” I know of few statements that will rouse the ire of our modern assertive, rights-seeking, power-seeking culture than this. But it is God’s Word, and we must resist those who would explain it away. It is God’s design for fullness. Are there qualifications? Of course. “Submit” is not a synonym for servile, menial bondage. The appeal is to free responsible people and can only be heeded voluntarily. Moreover, none are called to follow it into sin or irrationality or harm of any kind. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This is a charge for *Christians* who are living as *Christians*.

### **Fullness Through the Husband (v. 19)**

Verse 19 gives us the counterpart injunction: “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” Here the commandment to men is just as radical as that to women. As Eduard Lohse has shown, such a command does not appear in any of the extra-Biblical household rules of the day. The novelty of such a religious command must have struck the Colossian Christians with great power. Husbands were commanded to love their wives! What a novel thought! The command was not to *erotic* love (as some would expect) or to *friendship* love, but to *agape* love, which involves unceasing care and loving service for the wife’s entire well-being. The Christian ethic for a husband’s love for his wife was light-years beyond the formal domestic ethics of the day.

A parallel passage (Ephesians 5:25-33) gives the archetype of the love that is called for here, especially verse 25: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Thus, this radical command to love is only fulfilled when a husband loves his wife in imitation of Christ’s love.

A husband’s love must first, then, be *incarnational*. Genesis 2:24 anticipated this high call when it said, “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” The idea is something of *mutual* incarnation. With this ancient truth in mind Paul wrote in

Ephesians 5:28, 29, “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it.” This is a high call and may seem impossible. But it is possible to incarnate ourselves into our wives’ *emotions* and *mental processes*. It is possible to have *spiritual* incarnation with her. It is possible to love our wives as we love our own bodies.

Dr. Robert Seizer, in his book *Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery*, tells of performing surgery to remove a tumor in which it was necessary to sever a facial nerve, leaving a young woman’s mouth permanently twisted in palsy. In Dr. Seizer’s own words:

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamp light, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks. “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.” All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

It is possible to love your spouse as your own body. Practically, this means that the husband must do all he can to understand her world.

When my wife visited her sister in Connecticut, I was in charge of our four small children for a week. I fixed all the meals, changed thousands of diapers, fixed hurts, settled quarrels, gave baths, cleaned up catastrophes and cleaned them up again. I was at work *before* I got up and *after* I went to bed. The experience so marked me that I invented a new kitchen, modeled on a carwash. The walls are tiles, and the floors slope to a large drain in the middle of the room. A hose hangs on the wall, nozzle ready to spray things down after the meal!

Loving incarnationally means we must work at spending *time* together. The June 1986 issue of *Psychology Today* carried an article entitled “Marriages Made to Last” in which they surveyed several hundred happily married couples. The interviews were conducted privately with each spouse alone. The top two things they said kept a marriage going were:

“My spouse is my best friend.”

“I like my spouse as a person.”

The researchers said good marriages develop among those who purposely spend a lot of time together.

Along with this, loving incarnationally means *listening*. As Howard Hendricks says, “Marriage is sometimes the dialogue of the deaf.” The *Harvard Business Review* says 65 percent of an executive’s time should be spent listening. So much more so in our most intimate relationships. “He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame” (Proverbs 18:13). Incarnational love spends time, listens, gives itself. Such is Christ’s love.

Christ's archetypal love was not only *incarnational*—it was *sacrificial*, for he died for us. If we are to have a love like Christ's, we will be willing to die for our wives. This also calls us to a daily dying, and that is far more difficult. The rubber meets the road when we have to make a decision between free tickets to the baseball game and fixing the leaky faucets we promised to fix.

The positive side of dying is that we learn to live not only for Christ, but for our wives. When Anne Morrow married Charles Lindbergh, she was a timid, young woman, and he, having been the first to cross the Atlantic solo by air, was one of the most famous men in all the world. He *was* the American Eagle—a *bona fide* national hero. She could easily have been swept aside in all the adulation which came his way. But, loved by him, she grew to become one of our country's most popular writers. Here is how she puts it:

To be deeply in love is, of course, a great liberating force and the most common experience that frees... Ideally, both members of a couple in love free each other to new and different worlds. I was no exception to the general rule. The sheer fact of finding myself loved was unbelievable and changed my world, my feelings about life and myself. I was given confidence, strength, and almost a new character. The man I was to marry believed in me and what I could do, and consequently I found I could do more than I realized."

The Eagle's soaring love caused shy delicate Anne Morrow Lindbergh to fly too. This is what sacrificial love can do. Sacrificial love mutually elevates both partners in the marital relationship.

Loving our wives as Christ loved the Church also involves *intercessory prayer*. Christ so perfectly participates in our lives that he perfectly prays for us. We husbands should strive to pray with the deepest "incarnational" knowledge possible. But we will be weak intercessors if we have failed to love our wives with incarnational sympathy. Peter says, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). A foundering prayer life may be due to a failing in our most fundamental personal relationship. We must pray for our spouses in intimate detail, not just with a blanket beatitude. We must praise God for her strengths and lay her needs before him. She needs detailed prayer for what she faces each day, for how she relates with the children, for her interaction with neighbors, for her many duties, for her insecurities, for her challenges.

We have seen two radical calls. One call is to wives: *submission*. The other is to husbands: to *love* as Christ loves. These cannot be read in isolation; They go together. It is unthinkable absurd for a Christian husband to demand submission of his wife if he is not radically loving her; likewise, it is errant logic for a wife who is not submissive to demand such love.

These brief words give us the pattern for fullness in Christian marriage—full love, full commitment, full exchange, full blessing. Whether we are beginning or far along, let us have no other goal than having the best marriages possible!

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## Endnotes

1. Michael R. Tucker, *Live Confidently* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1976), p.61.
2. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* ((Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), pp. 192, 193.
3. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon, World Biblical Commentary, Volume 44* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp. 218, 219.
4. F.F. Bruce and E.K. Simpson, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), pp.289, 290:

This phrase has a thoroughly stoic ring about it; but the injunction ceases to be stoic when Paul baptizes it into Christ by adding the words, “in the Lord.” By treating the relation between the sexes in the context, Paul (contrary to much popular opinion) places essential dignity of women in general and of wives in particular on an unshakable foundation.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
6. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), p. 158, note 28: “Pre-Christian antiquity knew of the terms ‘to love/love’ ...but in the Hellenistic world these terms do not occur in rules for the household.”
7. Richard Seizer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), pp. 45, 46.
8. Charles Swindoll, *Think It Over, “Love Without a Net,”* a publication of the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton Church of Fullerton, California.

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