

All of Life Redeemed

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Colossians 3:18-4:1

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transformation

The preacher doesn't practice what he preaches.

C. S. Lewis writes in his essay, *The Sermon and the Lunch*, about a vicar (a vicar is synonymous with pastor in the Anglican Church tradition) who was preaching on family life. “‘The family is the foundation for civil society,’ he pounded from his pulpit. ‘It’s the primary institution where character is formed. It’s the place where we retreat from the outside world to be most fully ourselves.’”

Lewis observed that when the vicar preached this way, everybody in his congregation tuned him out. They began to fidget and squirm. This sermon, for all practical purposes, was a total waste of time.

You see, everybody knew what life was like at the vicar’s house. “I know the preacher’s home life pretty well,” Lewis writes. “In fact, I had been lunching there that very day.” The vicar’s son and daughter happened to be home on break from school. The daughter whispered to Lewis, “For God’s sake stay for lunch when they ask you. It’s always a little less frightful when there are visitors.”

Lunch at the vicar’s house follows a typical pattern. The vicar begins by lecturing on a subject he routinely knows nothing about. On this day, it happened to be the re-education of Germany after the war, even though the

vicar had never been to Germany or knew anything about German history. When his son attempted to soften his preposterous claims, his father promptly cut him off. The vicar would never think of behaving this way in polite society. He would never interrupt any other young man as he interrupted his son. He would never have talked confident nonsense about subjects of which he was totally ignorant.

The vicar’s wife ignores her husband. She starts in about how badly some neighbor has treated her. “Mother, that’s not quite fair,” her daughter protests, “Mrs. Walker never said that.”

By now the lunch is in shambles. The vicar has worked himself into a boil while his wife plays the hurt card for all it’s worth.

The disparity between the preacher’s precepts and practices are plain to see. His congregation knows he isn’t telling the truth. He isn’t honest about what family is like in the real world. He preaches an overly sentimental view of family life. That’s why his people have stopped listening to him. The preacher doesn’t practice what he preaches.

Family life is not a panacea; heaven on earth. Lewis describes it as an “arduous vocation.” Family life, like everything else, stands in need of God’s redemption.

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Let me take you back to God's Big Story. We are created to live in relationship with God and each other. But we fall out of these relationships through something called sin. Lewis writes, "Since the fall, no institution has a natural tendency to go right...If charity begins at home; so does un-charity."

Family is the one place where our sins are exposed most fully. Our self-centered nature is put on display for everyone to see. It's hardest to be a Christian at home. And it's the most necessary.

God wants to redeem families. God's redemption has the capacity to drill all the way down to the places where we live and work. God wants to redeem our whole lives, not just our religious lives.

Today's scripture lesson represents what is called in Paul's letter to the Colossians "the household codes." There are four such household tables in the New Testament. Paul singles out three categories for special consideration: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. I drove myself crazy this week trying to shoehorn these three categories into a single sermon. How does one talk about marriage, family and job in 20 minutes? It can't be done! I've decided to make introductory comments about each category and circle back to a series of sermons on marriage, parenting and work in early June.

The first category addresses wives and husbands in verses

18-19. Some of you just roll your eyes at Paul's directive to wives. You've already written Paul off as hopelessly old-fashioned. Let me caution you about reading our 21st century biases into the text. There is not a single reference in any household code from the ancient world that speaks to the obligations incumbent on husbands. Everything written underscores the privileges afforded to husbands. There is nothing in Stoic philosophy, Greek or Jewish literature that talks about a husband's duty to love his wife.

Furthermore, the Greek word for love, agape, is the highest form of love. It eclipses friendship (philia) and romantic love (eros). Whenever the Bible speaks of God's love, agape is used. Agape love is self-giving and sacrificial.

Paul writes a comparable household code in Ephesians that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). Let me remind you how Christ loved the church. Christ loved the church by laying down his life for it. Husbands are never called to lay down their lives for their wives in ancient literature. There is no qualitative difference in this passage between wives submitting to their husbands and husbands laying down their lives for their wives. Both are called to sacrificial, self-giving love.

This passage could revolutionize marriages in our day if we took Paul's imperative seriously. It would arrest all this blithering talk about marriage not meeting my needs. Those of you who are married—seek

...we are loved by God, not because we are loveable, but because God is love.

to meet your spouse's needs and the whole thing will wash back over you.

On Hunter Mill Road, near where we live, there is a one-lane bridge. It's such a throwback that on a major thoroughfare in a metropolitan area, two lanes of traffic are reduced to a single-lane bridge. Pull up to the bridge and a sign instructs you to yield the right-of-way. The signs are identical on either side of the bridge. What a poignant image for marriage. Husbands and wives are called to give way and yield to each other.

The second category of home life singles out children and parents in verses 20-21. Although fathers are mentioned specifically in verse 20, elsewhere in the New Testament this Greek word for father refers to both parents, so we can confidently assume Paul is addressing both mothers and fathers here.

Children are directed to obey their parents. No surprises here. But you won't find verse 21 in any other first century household code. Fathers and mothers must not provoke their children to the point of exasperation. Parents can break a child's spirit by making obedience a condition of parental love. I love you only if you meet my expectations.

Many parents drive their kids mercilessly to excel. It's particularly acute in a high-achieving area like metro DC. Some kids buckle under the pressure. They give up trying to please their parents. It's

no use, they say. No matter what I do, it's simply not good enough.

In God's Big Story, we are loved by God, not because we are loveable but because God is love. God calls parents to love and value children for who they are, not for who they ought to be or should have been.

The third category of home life is written to slaves and masters. This is the longest of the three sections, extending from 3:22-4:1. The inclusion of slaves in first century households is hardly surprising. Slaves were an integral part of first century family life. Paul addresses slaves in this passage as full-fledged members of the Colossian church, not as second class citizens.

You might wonder why Paul doesn't challenge the institution of slavery in this passage. Paul certainly doesn't endorse slavery in these verses. He cites this master-slave relationship to illustrate how our new life in Christ changes the way we treat each other.

You might expect Paul to remind slaves of their duty to obey their masters. Yet, no first century household code mentions a master's duty to treat slaves with justice and fairness. The phrase "earthly masters" implies that slaves and masters alike answer to a higher authority—namely a master in heaven (4:1).

The master-slave comparison is hardly analogous to employment in our day, although some of you may feel as though you perform slave labor in your job, chained to your cubicle or performance review. Paul's point is that we don't merely

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work for the government or private industry. We work for the Lord. In fact, we do our best work for the Lord. Paul's assertion in 3:24 that "It is the Lord Christ you are serving," is the central theme of this household code. The Lordship of Christ is referenced nine times in a span of seven verses. In the first century, the Roman emperor was given the title Lord to indicate his unquestioned supremacy and authority. When we profess Jesus Christ as Lord, we affirm Christ's absolute sovereignty over every area of human life. His Lordship extends into our homes and marketplace. There is no place more essential to live under the Lordship of Christ than the places where we live and work.

Jesus is not only our religious Lord. Drop the word religious. Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no distinction in the Bible between the sacred and secular. Wives and husbands submit and love each other "in the Lord." Children and parents fulfill their roles in such a way that "pleases the Lord." Slaves and masters are repeatedly challenged to work "for the Lord."

If you have never professed Jesus Christ as Lord of your life, I invite you to utilize the prayer at the end of this sermon as your personal prayer. If Jesus Christ is knocking on the door of your heart, then, for God's sake, open the door. Those of you who have made such a profession will recognize that we don't only make this profession once in our lives. We are confronted with a thousand little choices about who is Lord.

Invite Jesus Christ to be Lord of the relationship to my wife, my husband, my ex-wife, my ex-husband, my children, my step-children, my family, my estranged family, my parents. Invite Jesus Christ to be Lord of my school life, my job, my retirement years, the way I spend my free time. What areas of your life do you need to turn over to the Lordship of Jesus Christ?

Prayer of Commitment

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I thank you for dying for my sins and extending to me the unconditional gift of love and forgiveness. I desire to follow you as Lord, to live for you, and to trust you as you transform me into the person you want me to be. Fill me with your Spirit and use me to share this faith and love with others. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus' name. Amen.

