

In March of 1981 Bill Baker married Edna Harvey in London, England. Both were 76 years old. Their marriage created a number of problems, none of which had to do with their ages. The problem was, Edna Harvey was Bill Baker’s granddaughter’s husband’s mother. Bill’s granddaughter, Lynn, explained it this way: “My mother-in-law was now my step-grandmother. My grandfather was now my stepfather-in-law. My mom became my sister-in-law and my brother became my nephew. But even crazier than that, was that my husband now became my uncle and my own children were my cousins.”

Family relationships can become complicated. Even for myself, I was raised with a step-father, and grew up with a step-sister and half-brother. But today family relationships continue to grow even more complicated as the culture and society we live in continues to try to redefine relationships and families by confusion of gender and role issues. But for those of us “*in Christ*” there is no confusion. At the end of the third chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus defined relationships within the family of God as “*whoever does the will of God*” (Mark 3:35). In our text for this morning, the apostle Paul explains in detail how those relationships within the family of God in this world are to be lived out.

Remember that over the past few weeks God’s Word has challenged those of us who claim to know Jesus to live like we know Jesus. God has been telling us that it’s not enough to believe that Christ is supreme and sufficient over all of creation; he must also be supreme and sufficient over each one of our lives as individuals, and over our corporate lives together as the body of Christ, the church. We are to *live* for the glory of God and *live together* for the glory of God. This morning God clearly defines how we are to relationally live out the preeminence of Christ – as God speaks through the apostle Paul about the supremacy of Christ in our personal relationships. God’s Word puts before us how the supremacy of Jesus Christ is to be lived out in the three key relationships we have in life.

1) The supremacy of Christ is God’s model for marriage relationships. Colossians 3:18-19: “*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*” The Bible views marriage as a partnership, with each partner filling certain roles. As Paul starts by focusing on the duty of wives in the marriage relationship, and there is probably no biblical teaching more controversial in our society and culture than that of a wife’s submission to her husband.

The concept of submission is taught often in the Bible. It does not mean slavery or imply inferiority. The Greek word means “to arrange one’s self under a delegated authority” and comes from the military world where soldiers put themselves under the direction of their superior officer. What that means is that in the home, the wife is to put themselves under the delegated authority of her husband. There are many who claim Christ today who reject this concept by calling it cultural to Paul’s day. But the fact that a principle of God is not popular does not mean we can ignore or reject it.

The reason for this submission is found at the end of verse 18: “*As is fitting in the Lord.*” Another way to say it is, “This is what God has planned for you.” A wife is to submit to her husband out of the same faithfulness that she shows to Jesus Christ. This is not a cultural issue but represents God’s relational order for the marriage relationship. It is not an issue of culture but of God’s created order. That’s how God set it up in beginning - “*For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve*” (1 Timothy 2:13).

We see God’s purpose in this in that submission carries with it the idea of entrusting oneself to the leadership of another to accomplish a greater purpose. When a wife is submitted to the Lord - and to her own husband - she will experience a release and fulfillment that can come no other way. The end result will be an environment and relationship of intimacy and of growth, and a ministry partnership that will transform the world. But husbands, before you start gloating and posting this verse on your wife’s mirror, take a look at the next verse: *Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*”

Throughout the Bible, God says more about the quality of a husband's leadership than He does about a wife's submission, as the primary responsibility for a good marriage is put on the husband. Ephesians 5:25 tells us that we're to love our wives in the same way that Christ loves the church. That means I must love Nancy, we must love our wives, to the point of dying for them. God's tells us that we are "*not be harsh with them.*" This phrase can also be translated, "Don't become resentful toward her." That means that even if a wife is not perfectly submissive, the husband is not to become resentful. Husbands must prevent a sour or critical attitude from taking root in their hearts against their wives. Brothers and sisters - husbands and wives - Jesus is to be supreme in our marriage relationships.

2) The supremacy of Christ is also God's principle for parenting relationships. Colossians 3:20-21:

*"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."* Children are to listen and carry out the instructions of their parents. "Obey" here is in the present tense, which means obedience is to be continuous. When a child obeys his or her parents in everything, God is pleased. Children, when you obey your parents, God has a promise for you: "*Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*" (Deuteronomy 5:16). Obedience brings God's pleasure and God's blessing of God's promise.

In 1 Samuel 15:22-23 we read that God puts rebellion on a par with witchcraft and idolatry. Because of the ramifications of disobedience, and in view of the blessings of obedience, parents must take seriously the task of training their children to obey. Yes, we need to be engaged and encouraging, but we must also expect obedience from our children. That's why Colossians 3:21 gives fathers an awesome responsibility: "*Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*"

There are four things fathers can do to their children that would cause them to "*become discouraged.*" 1) *Ignore them.* A father who has no time for his children soon creates within them a deep-seated resentment. Children then grow up feeling unloved and unaccepted and may end up looking elsewhere to have their needs met. 2) *Indulge them.* These types of fathers give their children everything they want. But the truth is there is a difference between what children want and what they need. Children who are indulged usually become restless, dissatisfied, and spoiled. 3) *Insult them.* Some dads like to criticize their kids. Sarcasm and ridicule will cause a child to "*become discouraged.*" 4) *Intimidate them.* Threats and unfair expectations will crush a child's soul and scar them for life.

Ephesians 6:4 says: "*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*" Children do not become discouraged when their fathers make it as easy for them to obey. When children are taught self-discipline and instructed in the ways of the Lord, it is easy for them to obey - as they then not only know the way of obedience but also the way of life. Children must be given responsibility according to their God-given abilities so that they can learn to submit to God-ordained authority in this life and the life to come. Christ is to be supreme in our parenting.

3) The supremacy of Christ is also God's means for all relationships in the world. Colossians 3:22-4:1:

*"Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."*

We now come to Paul's teaching regarding relationships between slaves and their masters. It is here we look into the larger context of how we are to live out our faith in Christ through our relationships with those in authority over us and those in submission under us. The Colossian church no doubt had slaves and owners as members, in fact it was probably the only place in that society that they would get together on the same level, without racial or class distinctions.

At the time of Paul's writing it was believed that almost 50% of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves. Know that slavery was not a racial issue in the Roman world like it was in our country. Slaves were usually those who were defeated militarily and carried off by their conquerors. The Roman Empire ultimately lost its commitment to slavery - as the gospel penetrated further into the culture and more masters and slaves started treating each other like brothers and sisters in Christ. God's Word is telling us today that Jesus is our Master and we all are to relationally live as his slaves, his servants in a way that reflects His supremacy in and over our lives. In our text here we see three ways we can relationally live out the supremacy of Christ in our lives in the fallen world we live in.

1) We are to do our best at all times. But we are not to do so for personal gain. *"by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord."* 2) We are to worship God in all that we do: *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."* 3) We are to live not for worldly rewards: *"knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."* Jesus calls us to live out our lives humbly and excellently and exceptionally and always, always for Him.

It's at this point that Paul, knowing that our fallen nature will fight against any desire we might have to make Jesus preeminent in our lives - gives us instructions as to how we should pray to make Jesus supreme in our lives and in the lives of others. Colossians 4:2-6 *"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."*

When Paul wrote *"continue steadfastly in prayer"* he was strongly suggesting unrelenting persistence in prayer and brings to mind how steadfast the early church was in Acts 2:42: *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* In Luke 18:1, Jesus told his disciples, *"that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."* When Paul writes of *"being watchful"* he is speaking of being *focused*. This brings to mind the Jesus' words to his disciples the night before he was crucified: *"Remain here and watch. . . Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mark 14:34, 38). Focused prayer provides the spiritual fortitude to face down sin and temptation. This like a soldier who is on guard in the midst of war, who realizes he's in a battle of life and death. Because we're in a spiritual battle for our very souls, we need to stay on high alert and focused at all times. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us: *"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*

We read that we are also to pray *"with thanksgiving."* Gratitude is a stimulus to prayer: gratitude both for who God is (in his holiness, sovereignty power and glory) in view of who we are (lost sinners in desperate need of God's mercy, grace and forgiveness) - and in gratitude for what God has done and continues to do, in spite of us (His presence, provision, pardon, promises, and purposes). Paul said this in Colossians 1:3: *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you."*

While verse two tells us *how* we should pray, verses three and four tell us *what* we should pray for. We should first *pray for opportunities to proclaim the truth of God's Word:* *"At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word."* It is more than significant that while Paul was writing this letter from prison he does not ask for prayers that he would be released or for better food or for better conditions. Instead he prayed God would use his situation to be a witness of Jesus. Too often we pray for a change of circumstance or change of conditions rather than for a change of heart for the cause of Christ in the midst of our circumstance and conditions. Because Paul embraced the supremacy of Jesus in his life, he constantly prayed for doors of opportunity to proclaim Jesus.

And while we should pray for doors of opportunity to proclaim Jesus, we should also pray that when a door of opportunity is opened that we clearly present the gospel: *“At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak..”* One of the great failures of our witness for the supremacy of Jesus Christ is that we often squander doors of opportunity to share Jesus by being *too vague about what we say*. Once God opens a door, we must clearly proclaim the mystery of Christ. Our Christian witness should clear up what is cloudy. As we’ve learned in Colossians, the mystery of our faith is that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the death, and that when we repent and confess our sins and surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we then receive a new life and Jesus lives in us today and forever, which is *“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

God’s Word then tells us that the supremacy of Christ can also be seen in us in the way we speak to people *about God*: *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* The phrase *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders”* exhorts us to live a life so full of the preeminence of Jesus Christ that we would never say anything or do anything that would become a barrier to the gospel of Jesus Christ doing a transformative work in anyone’s life. Often this simply means that we need to remember that those who don’t yet know Jesus are watching us closely. When Jesus sent his disciples out to spread the good news of the gospel, he told them in Matthew 10:16 to *“be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”* This doesn’t mean we are to be sneaky or deceitful; this is rather an attitude of one’s heart for God regarding good and evil. God’s Word says it best in Romans 16:19 when we are challenged *“to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.”*

This is also to be true of us here today because our greatest witness in living out the supremacy of Christ is how we speak about each other within the church. Gossip, criticism and complaining about one another does reach the ears of those outside the body of Christ. If *“Christ in you, the hope of glory”* is truly at work in our lives, we will then be compelled to use every door of opportunity that God gives us as a means to accomplish as much spiritual good as we can in all of our relationships.

*“Let your speech always be gracious.”* It’s important that we communicate with words of grace when we speak to one another and about one another - and especially so when we speak to those who don’t know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. What we say should reflect the supreme preeminence of Jesus in our hearts. Our call in Christ is to be like Jesus. He was the perfect embodiment of both grace and truth. Even when he dealt with sin, Jesus spoke words of grace. In Luke 4:22, after listening to Jesus teach, *“All spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.”*

*“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* Salt enhances flavor, makes food appetizing. Salt also makes one thirsty. The way we live for Christ, and the way we talk about Christ should be full of flavor, and cause those who watch us and hear us to hunger for more. And when they respond with a hunger and thirst for Jesus, we should be ready and *“know how you ought to answer each person.”* When people hunger and thirst for Jesus Christ, they will want an explanation. This is the natural process of what happens when people see the supremacy of Jesus Christ in us. 1 Peter 3:15 says: *“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”* What we *say* should reveal the supremacy of Jesus in our hearts and lives.

It’s here that Paul shifts from speaking about what we say should reveal the supremacy of Jesus in our hearts and lives - to speaking about *what we do* should reveal the supremacy of Jesus in our hearts and lives. This is the apostle Paul’s way of telling us that our walk should match our talk, that our lips must be in balance with our life, that our words and our actions should be the same. In the remaining verses he speaks of this in the context of what we should do in terms of serving Jesus Christ.

While we honor Paul as one of the greatest apostles, as he passionately served the cause of Christ with every fiber of his being, we must also remember that many others served by his side. None of us is complete by ourselves; we cannot serve our Lord Jesus alone. It is why Paul wrote: "*For we are God's fellow workers*" (1 Corinthians 3:9). Paul served Jesus alongside a number of other servants of God and each one reflected the supremacy of Jesus to varying degrees as they served. Paul first gives us five different examples of how the preeminence of Jesus was seen in those who *faithfully* served God.

The first faithful servant Paul mentions is Tychicus in Colossians 4:7-8: "*Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts,*" Tychicus had three responsibilities: he delivered Paul's letters to the churches, he let them know how Paul was doing, and he encouraged their hearts. Paul was confident in giving Tychicus these responsibilities because Tychicus was faithful. He called him, "*a beloved brother, faithful minister and fellow servant.*"

The second faithful servant is Aristarchus in verse 10: "*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you.*" Aristarchus stayed with Paul no matter what the circumstances were. He risked his life during a riot in Ephesus, he sailed with Paul to Rome, and suffered through a shipwreck. And now he's a "*fellow prisoner*" with Paul. The third faithful servant is Jesus, or Justus in verse 11: "*Jesus who is called Justus*" also sent his greetings. The name Jesus was a popular name in Jewish families. In Hebrew it's "Joshua" which means "Yahweh is salvation." Most likely Jesus used his Roman name Justus after his conversion in order to gain open doors in the Roman Empire, like Paul (formerly Saul) did.

The fourth faithful servant is Luke in verse 14: "*Luke the beloved physician greets you.*" Dr. Luke played an important role in Paul's life. He traveled with Paul on his third missionary journey and wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Luke took care of Paul when he was beaten and suffering in prison. Luke was well educated and highly trained, yet he chose to use his gifts for serving the kingdom because everything else was secondary to the supremacy of knowing Christ. Luke's faithfulness was seen at the end of Paul's life when he wrote "*Luke alone is with me*" (2 Timothy 4:11).

Paul's fifth servant demonstrated her faithfulness by turning her home into a church. Her name is Nympha. We read of her in verse 15: "*Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*" Paul wanted to make sure that he gave a special greeting to this woman who opened up her home to the fellowship of the early shepherd groups. Paul recognized the critical role in the kingdom of intimate relational ministry to the growth of both individuals and the church.

After giving us five different examples of how the preeminence of Jesus Christ was seen in those who *faithfully* served God – Paul then gives us an example of a man who reflected the supremacy of Jesus by *fervently* (passionately/zealously) serving God. His name was Epaphras: "*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis*" (Colossians 4:12-13). Epaphras was the evangelist who planted the church in Colossae and labored in teaching and shepherding as their first pastor. Paul tell us he was a prayer warrior, who was "*always struggling on your behalf in his prayers.*" The verb for "*always struggling*" is the same word for the way Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here we see that prayer is a battle. Prayer is the only personal means we have to defeat the enemy of our souls.

It is in this list of servants of God that Paul also gives us a glance of one who was a casualty of the spiritual war that comes in the midst of battle for the preeminence of Jesus Christ who *faltered* in serving God. This was the case with Archippus in verse 17: "*Say to Archippus, 'See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.'*" We really don't know anything about Archippus except what Paul writes here. For some reason Archippus, was neglecting the ministry he had been given.

And so Paul reminds him to get busy and finish what he had been called by God to do. We don't know the reason Archippus fell back but we do know that sometimes we all need to be pushed and challenged to follow through on what we have committed ourselves to. Other times, we need a push to step forward in our faltering service and get more involved in the ministry God is calling us to. In that same vein Paul also gives us a glance of one who was a casualty of the spiritual war that comes in the midst of battle for the preeminence of Jesus Christ who was *fickle* in serving God. His name was Demas. In verse 14 we read that along with Luke "*greet you, as does Demas.*" It's like was Paul saying, "Oh yeah, and Demas too." This is a shift for Paul. Demas was from Thessalonica and was part of the original group that traveled with Paul. In Philemon 24, he is called a "*fellow worker.*" But in today's text Paul simply calls him "*Demas*" because Paul had become aware of the spiritual drift of Demas' fickle faith. In 2 Timothy 4:10, written five years later, Paul wrote: "*For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*" Ultimately Demas was more in love with this world than with the One who made the world. Jesus was not supremely preeminent in his life.

In that same vein again Paul again gives us a glance of two who were casualties of the spiritual war that comes in the midst of battle for the preeminence of Jesus Christ who were *forgiven* while serving God. While Scripture does indicate that Demas became spiritually lost, there are two others Paul mentions who also made some pretty serious mistakes, but yet they repented and sought forgiveness. The first forgiven servant is Onesimus. We read about him in verse nine: "*Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.*" We know a lot about Onesimus from the book of Philemon. He was a slave from the city of Colossae and his owner was Philemon. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and gone to Rome where he met Paul - and it was through Paul's influence that he came to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Paul urged Onesimus to go back to his master and in Philemon 1:12: we read that Paul convinced Onesimus to do so: "*I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.*" Philemon forgave Onesimus and received him as a "*beloved brother*" and Jesus became preeminent in his life.

The second forgiven servant was Mark in verse 23 where we read that he also sent his greetings. Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark for Peter and he was a cousin of Barnabas. At first Mark and Paul did not get along very well. When Paul and Barnabas launched their first missionary journey, they took Mark along with them as an assistant. But, when things got tough, Mark bailed and went home. Later, when Paul and Barnabas were getting ready to go on their second trip, Paul refused to take Mark along. This caused so much disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that they decided to split up so Mark could go with Barnabas. Soon after Paul extended mercy and grace, and he forgave Mark to such a degree that he trusted him implicitly and wanted Mark to be with him at the end of his life. In 2 Timothy 4:11 he wrote: "*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.*" The supremacy of Christ can be seen in us most clearly in the forgiveness that we know in Jesus Christ.

*"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross"* (Colossians 2:15-20). Jesus is supreme, preeminent, superior, first *in everything*. Everything we say and do - in our marriages, in our families, our churches and in the world we live in - should be done in submission to the Master who is truly over us, and a Lord who lives within us. The true test of the supremacy of Christ in our lives can be seen in how we relate to one another as husbands and wives, as fathers and mothers, as children, as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ and as we relate to the majority in our world who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. May Jesus be so supreme in our lives that we can do nothing but passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people!

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