

How love strengthens our closest relationships

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Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 0 0] So, good to be with you this morning. If you're new and you don't know me, my name's Neil MacMillan and I'm the minister here at Cornerstone. And we're going to take some time to think about what we read together in the Bible, which is from a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church in a city called Colossae, which is in Turkey, modern-day Turkey. And we've been kind of walking our way through this passage of Scripture or this letter that Paul wrote for quite a few months. And today, the kind of bit we're looking at is particularly from verse 18 down to chapter 4, verse 1. And so, verse 18 of Colossians 3 may give you a bit of a shock because it doesn't sound very PC, does it? Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wife. Don't be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents and everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, don't embitter your children or they'll be discouraged.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters and everything and do it, not only when their eye is on you to curry favor, but with sincerity and heart, reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair because you know that you also have a master in heaven. So, I've got four things we're going to mention this morning. First of all is that there is a bit of a big shock in these verses for us. Secondly, I think I want to talk about a big love that we find in God. Thirdly, big change that needs to happen in our relationships and then finally, a big gap that needs to be closed. So, a big shock, a big love, a big change and then a big gap. So, fairly simple. So, first of all, there is a bit of a big shock here because the word submit is a really difficult word for many of us. Wives, submit to your husbands. When I grew up, I had two brothers and we used to spend a lot of time fighting and my older brother would sit in my chest and hit me until I submitted. So, we always think about submission then. You know, my dad loved wrestling. He was a wrestler in the Highland Games when he was young and we always used to watch wrestling and boxing on the TV and in the wrestling, you know, you had to get the other guy to submit. So, often this word submit then in our heads throws up this whole idea of the use of power to dominate or sort of subjugate somebody else and to force someone to do what we want. And that is not what the Apostle Paul is talking about here. He's not talking about the use of force or overpowering people. He's not talking about threat or violence. And as Christians, we're really clear about that. We're not trying to re-establish the patriarchy. And as Christians, we also want to be very clear that marriage and the home should be a place of love and kindness. Because we live in a culture where chauvinism has led to so much abuse and domestic violence is very widespread. In the year 2017 to 2018, there were 59,541 incidents of domestic abuse reported to the police in Scotland. That's an increase in the previous year. It's a real serious entrenched problem in many families and in many relationships. And I just want to say this clearly. God hates bullies. God is against violence and He's against abuse. So, don't read this as a license for chauvinism.

Because what we have here is a command for men to love their wives. Okay, so that's the next line that we might miss out on. Husband, love your wives. Do not be harsh with them. So, it's a command for men to love their wives and for wives to cooperate and collaborate in this work of love.

I don't know what kind of house you grew up in or what kind of family you've been a part of over the years. But many people's experience of home is unhappy. Homes as places of strife, anger is often a huge issue for many people. Maybe anger is an issue for you. Or maybe anger is an issue in your relationships. Sarcasm is a form of anger. Belittling your spouse is a form of anger.

[5 : 45] Showing them up, moaning, grumbling, bursts of temper, aggression. Sometimes anger is the cold shoulder, the slow, icy anger. So, there's lots of ways of being angry in a relationship.

And what God is doing is He's setting this whole teaching about relationships and home and family in the context of loving relationships in the church family. So, we read in verse 12, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, gentleness, and patience. So, what should the home be like? Not a place of anger, not a place of sarcasm, not a place where we put other people down. Love, peace, thankfulness, gratitude, compassion, gentleness, patience. Those are the signature fragrances of our personal relationships, and especially of work and family relationships.

The Christian faith teaches that there is a great love behind everything that exists, and that this love is the love of God. And Colossians chapter 3, this part of the letter that Paul wrote, is really Paul trying to help us to understand that God sent Jesus into our world to pour love into our lives, so that first of all, our relationship with God will be restored, and then our relationships with each other will be restored. So, the beginning of this chapter of Paul's letter, Colossians 3, if you go back and look at it, it's all about living your life rooted in Jesus Christ.

And as your life is rooted in Jesus Christ, His love fills you in a way that changes the way that you interact with the people around you. So, God's always encouraging us to look upwards first and sort out that vertical relationship between us and Him, and that as we sort out that vertical relationship between us and Him, then suddenly transformation begins to happen in the horizontal relationships between us and our colleagues, or us and our children, or us and our spouse, or our partner.

Because what we want to get from this letter is this, that the everyday stuff of life, the everyday stuff of life should be changed by the presence of God's love within us.

So, there's a big shock here for people who think that Christianity is just teaching, you know, putting people under the thumb in some way. That's not what this is about. Secondly, I want to just move on to talk about, though, that there is a really big love at the heart of how we relate to God and to each other. Now, when Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians, in this section of the letter, what he's giving them is pastoral advice. So, this is not a political statement. It's not even a statement about ecclesiology or church polity. This is written to a real group of first-century Christians who are struggling with real relationship difficulties, who are struggling with real life difficulties. And he's saying to these people, in all the struggles that you've got, how can you live well and love well? And the reality of what your messy life is like, how do you love well? Some of them were slaves. Some of them obviously were in difficult marital situations. Some of them obviously had broken relationships with their children or with their parents. So, we can all kind of probably dial into some aspect of what they're going through in our lives. And this letter is saying to you, think well about how you love others when family life feels broken or your relationship with your parent or your kid feels broken or when your work situation seems intolerable. How do you love people well?

[10 : 28] And Paul's answer is by learning to love each other in costly ways, pressing the gospel deep into the reality of day-to-day living so that our ideas about God aren't just out there somewhere in the abstract, but they're in here really shaping the day-to-day ways that we go about things.

And we learn to love in costly ways by rooting our lives in Jesus, because no love is greater than His love. All we need is found in Him. The letter that Paul has written here to the Colossians is really saying in life, Jesus is enough. So, Augustine, the theology group's on again tonight, one of my favorite Augustine sayings, he who is Christ plus all the world has no more than he who is Christ alone.

Jesus is the fullness of God. He's the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way. Christ is sufficient for every need we have in life. So, all we need is found in Jesus, and the love we need is found in Him, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Christ. The way that Christianity thinks about marriage, about family, about children, even about work, the way that Christianity thinks about all these things is rooted in this concept of selfless, costly love, the love that we find in God. So, we're not approaching relationships in a very exploitative way, thinking, what can I get from this, and does it make me happy?

But we're approaching relationships and thinking, what can I give to this, and how do I make my partner happy? How do I make my kids happy? How do I make my parents happy? How do I make my colleagues happy, or my boss happy, or my employees happy? Because that's the question love asks.

[12 : 36] Think about God's great and awesome love for us. God looks at us, and He says, there's stuff in you I don't really like. So, God looks at me, Neil McMillan, and He can say to me, Neil, there are a lot of things in you I don't really like. Your selfishness, your anger, your greed, your twistedness in different ways. And God can see that in me and still love me.

And God can then see my twistedness, or my sin, or my selfishness, and He can say, between you and me there's this great gulf caused by your sin, and I want to make that right.

And the way I'm going to make it right is not by doing something to you, first of all, but by doing something myself. I'm going to take the cost of putting things right on myself.

I'll pay the price for restoring the relationship. You're the one who's to blame, but I'll take that blame on myself. So, God restores relationship through costly, selfless love. And that's what the story, the reality of Jesus is all about. He lives a life of suffering. He dies a cruel death as the Son of God, giving Himself, He tells us, as a ransom for many to set us free from the cost and the penalty of our sin. He pays the cost of our sin in His death so that He can forgive and bring us back to Himself. That's the love of God.

Paul writes another letter to a different church, the church in Ephesus, where he again talks about the relationship between husband and wife. And in that letter, he says that Jesus is the true spouse and the ultimate husband. Because the husband is the one who is willing to pay the cost of love.

[14 : 54] He's the one who's willing to make the sacrifices that will bring rich, loving, joyful relationship. And Jesus is the Son of God who becomes a slave so that people like us who are slaves to sin can become God's sons. He becomes our redemption.

So, the love that God wants to see in the way that you relate to your spouse, your kids, or your partner, or your employer, or your employee, that love is a costly love that will say, I'll pay the price necessary to make this work.

I'll take the weight of bringing joy into this relationship. And that's not a weight that any one of us can bear on our own. We root ourselves in the love of Jesus and His great love for us so that we can pour love into the life of others.

Do you know, one of the hardest places to see God's love, I think, is the family. You know, a lot of us can behave and act like Christians when we're in public.

And yet, when we're at home, we allow the worst parts of ourselves license. And, you know, the nastier parts of ourselves get out to play.

[16 : 30] So, the real Neil Macmillan isn't seen standing here on a Sunday morning, is he? He's seen at 10 o'clock at the end of a long day when he's grumpy and tired. And, you know, that's when the unpleasant bits of me are indulged, so to speak, sometimes.

And so, I think it's really important to say God's really interested in who you are. At home or at work, with difficult colleagues or hard family situations.

Or at school, with people you don't like in your class, or whatever it is. Just, that's God's really interested in what's going on there. And what kind of person you are in that situation.

And how you've thought about bringing God's love into that reality. If you step back from this letter a little bit, you actually, and put it in its historical setting.

So, this is the second thing I want to, or the third thing I want to talk about. It's a big change.

Because what Paul is advocating here is a really big change in the way that relationships work. So, the ancient world was full of lists of virtue.

[17 : 49] How to be a virtuous and good human being. How to be a virtuous and good husband. And so on. And part of those lists of virtue were household lists.

So, people like Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote household lists. Of how to live a life of virtue. Do you know what? They didn't even mention women.

And they didn't mention kids. Why? Because women and kids were thought to be so insignificant in that culture. They didn't rate. They didn't rate a mention. And so, Paul is saying, let's just turn that whole thing on its head.

And we'll talk about women first. Even before we talk about the men, we'll talk about the women.

Because what sin does is it takes relationships and it turns them into power struggles.

And the desire to dominate and have your way. The fall of human beings into sin brings about this desire to dominate and subjugate others.

[19 : 04] The restoring power of God's love brings justice and fairness back to relationships. So, in a world where women didn't count, where kids didn't count, and where slaves certainly never

counted, Paul is taking the underdog and he is lifting them up.

And he is saying, your life matters. And how you are treated matters not just to me, but to God in heaven. So, this is about changing the way we think about the use of power.

Instead of using power over others to get what we want, we use whatever power we have in the home or at work to love. To serve.

That's how Jesus uses his power. To serve and love and rescue. There's a professor at Western Sydney University in Australia called Sarah Irving Stonebaker.

And she says this. She says, After Cambridge, I was elected as a junior research fellow at Oxford University. And I attended three guest lectures by world-class philosopher and atheist Peter Singer.

[20 : 26] Peter Singer recognized that philosophy faces a vexing problem in relation to the issue of human worth. The natural world yields no egalitarian picture of human capacities.

What about the child whose disabilities or illness compromises her ability to reason? Yet, without reference to some set of capacities as the basis of human worth, the intrinsic value of all human beings becomes an ungrounded assertion.

A premise which needs to be agreed upon before any assertion or conversation can take place. I remember Singer's lectures with a strange intellectual vertigo.

I was committed to believing that universal human value is more than just a well-meaning conceit of liberalism. But I knew from my research of the history of European empires and their encounters with indigenous cultures that societies have always had different conceptions of human worth or lack thereof.

Okay? Societies have always had different conceptions of human worth or lack thereof. The premise of human equality is not a self-evident truth.

[21 : 35] It is profoundly historically contingent. I began to realize that the implications of my atheism were incompatible with almost every value I held dear.

So what she's saying to us is this. The fact that slaves can be treated as brothers and women become equal with men seems normal to us, but it was revolutionary in the first century.

And it was a revolution started by the love of Jesus Christ. And so God's love, if it's in your life, means real big change.

If this big love is present, it means big change. I'm going to just... We're really running out of time, so I'm going to fire through a few things to think about. Wives submit your husbands.

Husband loves your wife. So what does it look like? What does this change look like? Paul is not talking... You know, Paul, when he wrote this, wasn't fast-forwarding to the 21st century and imagining a guy sitting on a couch watching sport while his wife cooked the dinner and did the ironing and ran around washing his clothes.

[22 : 47] What does it mean for a wife to submit in any sense like this? Well, it's about allowing a husband to take responsibility in the home to lead everyone in the family towards Jesus Christ, to all that is good and to all that is holy and all that is lovely.

The word submit is about living under the influence of another. It's about yielding to a husband who takes responsibility to shape the home around the gospel. So husband, if you're thinking that being the man in the house gives you certain cudis, the cudis that God has given you is this.

Lead your family to God. Lead your spouse to God. Lead your children to God. Shape your home round the good news of Jesus.

That's the leadership of love. That's the leadership that seeks what is best. To see the gospel take root in the life of your family. So we can't reduce it to this kind of superficial idea of, I decide how we spend the money.

I decide this. I decide where we go on holiday. I decide what we do. Because then you're just reading this as, I get what I want because I'm the guy. And that's just not what Paul is talking about.

[24 : 14] He's talking about self-sacrificial love. It's the opposite of what Jesus is asking here. If you want to be a great husband, read the Bible with your wife.

Pray with her. Make time to care. Do the menial nasty tasks. Work hard to build reconciliation. Don't be harsh.

Don't retaliate. Do wash up, clean up, shop, cook, care for the children. Make yourself the servant of others. This is the husband who has put into death the things that Paul talks about here.

Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, anger, malice, slander, filthy language. This is the husband who has put on love, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Right, my favorite bit of this is children obey your parents and everything. Okay, so I really like that. And parents don't wind your kids up. This is not about demeaning children or pushing them around. [25 : 12] Many children are mistreated. Childhood is often a bitter experience. Parenting is not about constant criticism and crushing personality. So again in the home, allow a place where we help our children to develop and nurture Christ-like character.

And that means we ourselves develop and nurture Christ-like character. Help your children to know the gospel, follow Jesus, and be servants of others, to be generous and joyful. Our Father in heaven is our model for parenting. Children, how do you love your parents? By honoring them and their wishes. Slaves and masters.

This is not a license for economic exploitation. Paul is not condoning slavery. But he's writing to real slaves saying, how are you going to cope?

And he wants to give their work dignity. And so he says, what you do is for the Lord, not just for your master. And he demands that masters are just and fair with their slaves.

[26 : 15] Later in another letter, Paul writes to a man called Philemon, who's a slave owner, and says, welcome back, your runaway slave Onesimus, no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother.

So this is not a political statement on slavery, but it is, how do you live in a hard circumstance? We still live in a world of slavery, by the way.

Far more slaves today than there were probably in Paul's age. And we benefit often from the supply chain of forced labor and economic exploitation.

We should hate slavery, but more than that, we should think about how do we live well in our work relationships? You might feel like a slave at work sometimes.

Well, employees don't just work for your boss, work for the Lord. If your boss is not a Christian, especially, you want the way you work and the outlook you take to your work to be a great witness.

[27 : 16] And if you're a boss, then be fair and just. Pay fair, treat fair, protect, provide, treat your employee the way your master in heaven treats you.

So that's really fast, just going over some of these things. So big change in the way we go about stuff, because there's a big love behind everything. Just to finish, I want to say that there's a big gap often though that needs to be closed.

And that gap is between professing Jesus and possessing Jesus. If people want to see what God is really up to in our lives, if people want to see that God is real, if our relationships are going to be transformed, then we need to not just profess faith in Jesus Christ, but we need to possess Jesus Himself.

We need Jesus present in our lives. We need Jesus filling us day by day with His Spirit, with His love, with His wisdom.

That means every day you have to root your life back into Jesus in prayer, in worship, in confession of your sin, and trusting in the gospel. Because if you just talk about being a Christian but you don't have the power and reality of it, all this will go badly wrong.

[28 : 44] If Christ is not the one who rules your heart and your desires, then your misshapen desires, your warped attitudes will lead you to manipulate others in selfish and degrading ways.

But if the gospel is real in your life, if the love of God is real in your life, then that will take you to the place where you will protect and defend and nurture and care for all the people around you.

When Jesus is real in your life, you will die to your selfishness. You will crucify your greed. You will put to death laziness and resentment and anger.

And you will learn to love in costly and radical and generous, mind-blowing ways where people can say, wow, God's love really is there. So perhaps there's more than one thing we need to learn to do is just to die to ourselves and live for someone greater.

And we start with Jesus. We turn to Jesus and we say, I can't be this person. I can't love this way.

[30 : 03] I need you. I need your love. I need you to change me, forgive me, and renew me. So I want to say to myself and to you, what's the most important thing to do this morning?

First step, love God more. Ask God, give me more of your love and help me love you more. I want to get hold of more of you, God, in my own life. And then love others better.

If you're not a Christian, I just want to remind you, the Bible has this really clear, simple message.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Just trust your life to Him and He will make it right with you.

So, I'm going to say a very short prayer. We'll sing our last song. Lord, help us to hear the good news of Jesus this morning. Change us. Lord, we are often unloving, cruel, and selfish people. So change our lives. Fill them with your love. Amen.