**IT IS THE LORD CHRIST YOU ARE SERVING**

July 7, 2013

Colossians 3:18-4:18

Key Verse 3:24 “Since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Last week, we studied Colossians 3 with the title, “Keep Seeking Christ.” We learned that, after having been raised with Christ through faith in his death and resurrection, we must now set our hearts and minds on heavenly things, until we cross the finish line with Christ waiting there. May God richly bless your struggle to cross the finish line! In today’s passage, Paul emphasizes that each person has many roles to carry out in his or her life. But whatever our roles might be, ultimately, we are serving God. Those who make a decision to submit to God’s will and serve him, whatever they do, can do so with grace and truth. Through this passage, may God bless each of us to discover the spiritual secret of how to be always full of grace, seasoned with salt!

I. Roles in Christian households

First, Family living (3:18-21). Look at verses 18-21. “Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.” According to this passage, in one way or another, wives, children, husbands and fathers must submit to God’s will for them in the family, putting the interests of others ahead of their own. To the old self, the traditional roles for family members presented in this passage are a source of irritation. Such severe limitations on one’s personal freedom were a part of the justification for the “sexual revolution” of the sixties and seventies in the last century. People wanted to do it all: they wanted commitment, but the freedom to explore; they wanted children, but time for themselves; they wanted equality, but no responsibility. In short, they wanted the glory of the old self to be made the center of the new, “liberated” family. But there was a problem. When the old self became the center of the family, the family had no center, because each person saw himself or herself as the center. No one had anyone else’s interests at heart. The result was the disintegration of the family, the disintegration of authority and the disintegration of hope, because there was no vision. The “liberated” family was a failed experiment. Now it is universally recognized that a family is a family because each member of the family has a role to fill for the sake of the family. Jesus is the Lord of the family. Jesus is the center of the family. Our roles are ordained for us by God, according to God’s divine and perfect knowledge of how and why we were created.

In this short passage, Paul emphasizes the role of the woman by speaking about her first. Everything begins with the woman’s decision of faith to submit herself to her husband as her shepherd. It is a mystery of faith. Just as the church must submit itself to Christ as Lord and Husband, so the wife must submit to her husband, for the sake of her future family. Without her decision of faith, the family has no foundation, and there is no way for the work of God to be accomplished through them. Just as Sarah submitted to Abraham, and Mary to Joseph, so each Christian woman must make a decision of faith to submit to her husband as part of her submission to God’s sovereign will for her life. The role of men in the family is emphasized through Paul’s conferring on men the responsibility to love their wives, and to encourage their children. When we study the stories of Cain and Abel, and of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis, it is painfully obvious that sin in men is equated with irresponsibility, while repentance is taking responsibility for oneself and others. In fact, a man is not a man at all until he learns how to take responsibility for others. Taking responsibility means making a spiritual decision never to accept failure in fulfilling our roles. To fail to love our wives even one time can be a disaster from which a family might never recover. To embitter our children even one time can be a disaster from which a family might never recover. When husbands and wives set the spiritual foundation for a house church through their decisions of faith to submit and to take responsibility, then children can be so happy, and they can have hope. But children must not take the spiritual struggle of their parents for granted. Rather, they must learn from their parents’ examples, and struggle in their own lives to submit to authority as well as take responsibility for the unique gifts they have received from God.

Second, Christians at work (3:22-25). Paul writes to encourage slaves to work hard as working for the Lord, not for men. Look at verses 3:22-25. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 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 his wrong, and there is no favoritism.” Slaves were property, with no hope and no inheritance of their own. They had to work hard until they died. Their family members could be sold from their household at any moment. They were human beings, but they had no right to decide for themselves their future. Such a barren life brought great spiritual destruction in most men. They lost all sense or concern for right and wrong. They did whatever was convenient. They learned how to serve without giving their hearts. They were filled with hatred and a spirit of revenge. So many slaves, when they heard the gospel message, understood that God’s message of forgiveness, life and an eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God was God’s love and hope for them. They repented of their sins and believed in Jesus as their true Lord and Master. But their human situation was not better at all after believing in Jesus. So the slaves were tempted by their old self to continue to serve their masters as they had before – only as much as they were whipped or forced to do so. This slave mentality in serving our human masters is not limited to Paul’s time or the Roman Empire. Here the master and slave relationship can be applied to a modern day employer and employee relationship. The fundamental question is, “Who am I serving?” Those who serve with a slave mentality are in fact struggling to please their old self and serve themselves. We need to know that whatever our job might be, we are in fact working to serve the Lord. We have an inheritance in God that is forever. We have a heavenly reward that is ours by faith, when we run the race of faith from first to last. We do so in faith that the Lord knows our need, and will provide for us in the right amount at the right time. And we know that whatever injustice there might be in our working lives, God knows and God will repay. In his court, there will be no favoritism. So we can be free to work hard and grow as a source of blessing, knowing that in the end our reward will be far greater than any price we may have paid. For the sake of God’s blessing being poured out on our families, our company, our nation and the world, we must work at whatever we do with all of our heart, as serving the Lord. Even humblest service can be glorified and dignified by doing it for the Lord. There is no difference between secular and sacred work. Ruth Graham, who is a wife of Billy Graham, hung a sign over her kitchen sink, “Divine service held here three times daily.” Some may think that her washing dishes and taking care of her children were insignificant while her husband was doing God’s great work through his evangelism. But it was just as important in God’s work.

II. Roles in Christian mission

As Paul described in chapter 3, we have many responsibilities and many roles in the world. Sometimes, these responsibilities seem to take over our lives, so that we feel like a ship that is being tossed and driven by a storm – who knows where? At those times we might think that we are doing enough just to survive and meet our human obligations. But Paul does not sympathize with us in our daily struggles of life. Look at 4:2. “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” The word “devote” has the meaning of “commitment” as in, “commit oneself entirely” to some task. To devote oneself to prayer seems appropriate for monks or nuns, but not to us. However, Paul says clearly, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” Evidently, as much as we must take responsibility for our lives in the world, so we must take responsibility for our spiritual life and spiritual obligations in God. How can we do that? Verse 2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer.” This verse clearly establishes the essential role of prayer in our spiritual battle to run the race of faith so as to win the prize, and fulfill God’s will for our lives.

**What is prayer? We must first look at what prayer is** not**. Biblical prayer is not meditation. Prayer is not just talking to God, or listening to God.** By the strictest Biblical definition, prayer is making petitions to God, expecting to receive what we ask. One of the most important promises concerning prayer in the entire Bible is found in 1 John 5:14-15: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we have asked of him.” So when we pray, two conditions should be met. We have to ask according to God’s will, and when we ask, we should mean it, expecting to receive what we ask. Mindlessly reciting a prayer is a sin. You should never even recite the Lord’s Prayer mindlessly. When you pray that prayer, you should be conscious of what those words mean. If it is not your intent to make fulfilling them a priority in your life, you are sinning. So here are a few guidelines for effective prayer:

Don’t mindlessly repeat anything! It is sin to do it!

Don’t ask for anything unless you really mean your request; “put your heart into it.”

Always get right to the point and ask God for exactly what you want.

Give God a reason, a Scripturally based reason, why he should answer it.

Define your terms whenever a term could have several meanings.

And one other thing: Always accompany your petitions with thanksgiving (Php 4:6, 1 Tim 2:1).

For example, look at Jacob’s prayer before meeting Esau in Genesis 32:9-11. Before saying, “Save me,” he reminded God of his earlier promise, “I will make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea.” So he is giving God a reason. “If my children are killed, how can I have descendants like the sand of the sea.” Neglect of prayer is one of the most serious and pervasive failures of Laodicean Christians in the Book of Revelation. The biggest reason for unanswered prayer is not praying. God includes our prayers in his decision making. When we get to heaven, we will find out and regret that certain things were not done due to our lack of prayer. You have to be a prayer warrior to be an overcomer. But again, we must also fast or do something equivalent regularly if we are to have full power in prayer.

Look at verses 4:5-6. “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” Just as the Colossian believers had the spiritual responsibility to pray and watch, so they had the responsibility to be shepherds for the unbelievers and godless people around them. They could not do everything by themselves. They had to depend on God in prayer. They had to be wise. When the opportunity comes, they have to make the most of it. Jesus was on his way from Jerusalem to Galilee. But he stopped for a while at a well in Samaria while his disciples went into town to buy food. He asked a local woman who came to the well for a drink of water, but the woman was not happy to give him a drink. Jesus sensed that she was a very unhappy woman. He knew she was a sinful woman. He could have left her alone and waited for his disciples. But Jesus took the opportunity of a private conversation to help the woman realize her spiritual thirst. He asked her humbly for a drink; then he offered her the gift of God. When she confessed her burden of life to Jesus, Jesus touched her spiritual problem of having 5 husbands. But the woman was not offended at all. Rather, she was refreshed by the spiritual truth, and she invited all her townspeople to Jesus. Jesus was truly satisfied, and ready to serve all the Samaritan townspeople with the good news of the gospel. This joy can be ours as well, when our conversation is full of grace and seasoned with salt.

May God bless you to fulfill your responsibilities as God’s chosen instruments of righteousness, remembering that it the Lord Christ we are serving. May God bless your conversation and life to be full of grace, seasoned with salt.