

LIVING CHRISTIANLY

by Ray C. Stedman

How to live Christianly is one of the great problems we face as believers. It is helpful to remember that the secret of Christian living can be put in one sentence. Paul actually does that in his letter to the Galatians: "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh."

The root cause of the shame, weakness and violence of the world is that men and women are living in the lusts and desires of the flesh, fulfilling the urges that arise from within. But men and women are given a new basis to live on when they come to Christ. The glory of the gospel is that we have been given a new life, therefore we do not have to live the way the world lives any more. We can, in Paul's words, "put off the old and put on the new." That is what he stresses in all his letters, and notably so in this Colossian letter. A walk in the Spirit is what he calls it. It is two steps repeated over and over, consisting of these two actions, "putting off the old and putting on the new."

In the section of the letter before us, beginning with verse 18 of chapter 3, Paul moves to the actual experiences we face day by day. This is where "the rubber meets the road," as the saying goes---the blood, sweat and tears of living. Here he deals with our relationships, highlighting and examining what to put off and what to put on. Naturally, he begins at the very heart of all life, the family. Here is his word addressed to wives:

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

This word "submit" has become the focus of the feminist movement and is probably the most hated word among women today. The meaning has been grossly distorted. Many wrongs things have been done in the name of submission. Perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about submission is that it does not cancel out equality. Although it is addressed here to wives, it is not a female word in the Bible but is addressed to men as well. Thus it is not a sexist word.

Everyone must submit to other people. In Ephesians, Paul says Christians are to submit "one to another." The outstanding manifestation of true submission, of course, is seen in our Lord's submitting of himself to the Father. No one would ever conceive of the idea that Jesus found it a reproach to submit to the Father. He delighted in it. It was voluntary on his part. In no way did he regard it as a threat to the equality which he knew existed between himself and the Father. Therefore, to submit to someone does not mean you are not equal. This is the confusing meaning which the world has poured into this word. Submission does not mean inequality. Literally, it means "put yourself under, arrange yourself under someone, for a good and proper purpose." It is a totally voluntary action.

In Australia a number of years ago, Ron Ritchie and I were ministering as part of a team in the city of Brisbane. As we were going to a meeting one evening we stopped on a street corner to talk, and Ron hooked his arm around a pole holding a street sign. We were talking about something that the team wanted Ron to do but which he did not want to do, and he was sounding off about his feelings on the matter. As he talked, I looked up and read the sign which was over his head and immediately broke into laughter. Then he looked up and started laughing too. What the sign said was, "Give Way," which is the Australian way of saying, "Yield." In his dramatic way, Ron immediately cried, "A message from the Lord!" (which it really was!). He submitted himself at once, and the problem disappeared.

That thought is what Paul has in mind when he says that wives' submitting to their husbands is "fitting." It is proper; it is right. There is an order of authority in all God's world. The Father observes it. The Son observes it. Everything in nature observes it. There is a time to "Give Way"; to give in and support another. The great quality of this word is that it stresses the need to support. This podium in front of me is useful in that the flat section on top supports hymn books, etc. But notice that the useful part is supported and held up by a column

underneath. Without that support the rest of the stand, including the useful portion of it, would be useless. So, if the wife does not support and hold up her husband, honor him, and thus recognize his leadership role, there is chaos in the home. One of the reasons we are having so many problems in society today is that this concept of support has been distorted and set aside. So the apostle's word to a wife is, submit yourself to your husband! Follow him, not in things that are wrong according to your conscience---we are not even expected to do that with regard to the state---but in everything that is right show yourselves to be behind your husband. Submit to him, support him in his role of leadership in the family.

I would also add this word. This is addressed to wives. It is not the husband's responsibility to make his wife submit! After the first service this morning a man said to me, "I opened my Bible the other day and the first thing I saw was this verse, 'Wives, submit to your husbands.'" I said to him, "But that is not addressed to you. That is something Paul tells your wife to do. It is the next verse that God addresses to you." Without voluntary submission on her part the word is useless. Submission cannot be demanded. The Father did not demand it of the Son. It is a voluntary submission which wives are exhorted to make because it is fitting and proper; it is right in the sight of God.

Paul follows with a word to husbands.

"Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them."

Here again we learn what to put on and what to put off. Put on love! Husbands are to work at this. The key to the husband's role in marriage is contained in Paul's words, "Love your wife." He must give himself to that. Note it does not say, "Make love!" Although sex plays a very important role in marriage, and properly so, it is not the key to marriage. But love is. The word is agapao. That is God's word for love. Honor, value, respect, guard, protect, show delight in your wife. This is something a husband is to plan for and work at, not only on Valentine's Day or on wedding anniversaries, but all through the year as well.

The thing to put off is "harshness." It belongs to the old nature. Husbands are not to be caustic, bitter, resentful or sarcastic toward their wives. These things are especially hurtful to women. Lord Byron said, "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence." Women are made differently than men. You can be sharp with a man friend and he will shrug it off and not become upset by it. But if you do that with your wife you will cut her deeply, far more than you may realize. So, put off these traits of criticism and sarcasm. They are from the old life. As Christian husbands you do not have to act that way any more. If a husband says something sharp to his wife it is very difficult for her to give him the support which the Lord asks of her. I heard of a man who once said to his wife, "You're nothing but a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair!" Her response was, "You're nothing but a brag, a groan, and a tank of air!" She was cut by his words and responded in kind.

The third word here is addressed directly to children. I am grateful for that. It shows that in these early church meetings whole families were present. Earlier this morning we dismissed our children, so you parents must carry Paul's word to them.

"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."

The word "obey" comes from Greek words which mean "to hear under someone." Thus, children are exhorted to listen to their parents, recognizing that they are over them and have authority in their lives. Again, the theme of authority is present. Parents should point out to their children that they can please the God of glory by their willing obedience to them. Why is that pleasing to God? Because it preserves peace in the home, for one thing. Disobedient children are always a cause of strife and difficulty. Further, because it teaches respect for all authority. God knows that this is an immensely important part of life and ought to be taught to children as they are growing up. To teach your children to obey is extremely important. Remember how the book of Proverbs puts it. The Living Bible states it beautifully:

"Young man, obey your father and your mother. Tie their instructions around your finger so you won't forget. Take to heart all of their advice. Every day and all night long their counsel will lead you and save you from harm; when you wake up in the morning, let their

instructions guide you into the new day. For their advice is a beam of light directed into the dark corners of your mind to warn you of danger and to give you a good life."

Next, the apostle gives us the other side of the coin in words addressed to fathers:

"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

The word for "embitter" is from the word "to stir up, arouse, or irritate." That does not mean that parents are never to say or do anything that makes their children feel irritated. Discipline can often irritate a child. We must not seek to avoid every instance of that. But this word is given in the present continuous tense. Thus, it is really saying, "Fathers, do not keep on irritating your children. Don't keep hammering away at it, nagging them, or they will become discouraged." This is an important lesson for fathers. One of my grandsons was a bit sullen the other day when I was correcting him about something. When I asked him why he was acting that way he said, "Because you're always accusing me." That gave me pause. I did not realize it looked like that to him. I did not think I was always accusing him--I am sure I was not--but to him it looked that way. I realized I had better change and approach things differently. That is what this word to fathers is about.

I have discovered through long experience that there are three things which fathers do that are particularly irritating to children. The first is to ignore them. A father who has no time for his child soon creates in him a deep-seated resentment. The child may not know how to articulate or explain the problem, but he feels unimportant and worthless. A second source of irritation is to indulge your children, giving them everything they want. That soon will make them restless and dissatisfied. Children long for guidance and direction; for intimacy, not for superficial indulgence. Such indulgence will frequently create a deep-seated, sometimes lifelong feeling of resentment. Insulting them, calling them names and putting them down, is also a source of resentment in children. They will become discouraged and be put off from the things of God. I once heard of a father who was in the military and who would line up his children every morning and give them orders. Once as he was giving them their orders for the day he asked, "Any questions?" His son put up his hand and asked, "How do you get out of this outfit?" Many a child sooner or later will be asking the same question if their fathers do not obey the word of the apostle, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

A lengthier section, beginning in verse 22, follows, addressed to slaves and their masters. Representatives of each must also have been present during these early church services. It was probably the only place where slaves and masters got together on the same level, without racial or class distinctions. Paul first addresses a word to slaves.

"Slaves, obey your 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."

These are words to Christian slaves. At this time, one half of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves to the other half. Most households had several slaves, thus they formed an important part of the economy of the empire. People often ask, why do not the Scriptures directly address the problem of slavery? Why were not masters instructed to free their slaves? The answer is that conditions were not at all ripe for that. Several attempts to foment revolt among the slaves had already occurred in Roman history. The slave, Spartacus, had already led a revolt that was crushed with an iron fist, resulting in even worse conditions for slaves.

It is important to understand that it is not merely a reaction of Christians to those in control that results in freedom. There must first be a change of atmosphere that will allow for this. That is why this word exhorts slaves to personally control themselves and obey their masters. Not, as many were tempted to do, obey outwardly, with a heart of resentment, but with genuine service, as unto the Lord. Years ago, a missionary to Africa told me that he was responsible for getting the nationals in his area to do certain jobs. He discovered that they were all rather lazy and would only perform while he was actually watching them. When he left they would stop work and do nothing until he returned. This man had a glass eye, and one day when his eye was irritating him he took it out and put it on a stump. When he returned he found that everybody was still working because the "eye," as they thought, was watching them all the while he was away. That is what the apostle means here: eye-service! Working only when the boss is watching. This man thought he had found a great

way to free himself, until one day he returned to discover that one of the workers had sneaked around from behind and put his hat over the eye, and everyone was lounging around, enjoying themselves. That is eye-service!

We need to apply these words of the apostle in the realm of our work today. When you commit yourself to work for somebody you are, in a sense, selling yourself as a slave for the hours involved. Employers cannot control the rest of your life, but they do have a right to control your life during your working hours. These words therefore have direct reference to us. We are not to work only while the boss is watching. As the apostle says, whatever we do, we are to work at it "with all our heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since we know that we 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."

His appeal, of course, is very clear. We are to work "as unto the Lord." That is to be our motivation. It is the Lord Christ we are serving. Every employee ought to write that down and put it somewhere where he can see it during working hours. "It is the Lord Christ I am serving." Do not ever work for anyone else, as a believer. Work only for the Lord. Your employer may pay your salary, but it is the Lord for whom you are working. If you do that both the quality and the quantity of your work will improve, because you are working out of gratitude and love to the Lord. Love, of course, is the greatest driving force in life. What a change this will make in your job!

But, more than that, as the apostle suggests, there is a reward, or a lack of reward, involved. Here he is surely making reference to what the Scriptures call "the judgment seat of Christ," the great time of appraisal when every believer will stand before the Lord who will give his judgment as to what he has been doing in life. All that you and I have been doing will pass before our eyes and we will know whether it has been done "as unto the Lord" or for our own glory. There will be reward for that which is done from a proper motive of thanksgiving and glory to God. Some may ask, "What is the reward?" It is not material--beautiful garments or gold medals. The reward of faithful service is always opportunity for greater service. The reward is to be allowed to demonstrate your love in still greater service. That is why Jesus said that he that is faithful is given rule over ten cities, while another one, who is less faithful, is given rule over five cities. Thus, opportunity for service is the reward. It is what our hearts will desire more than anything else in that day.

On the other hand, Paul says, "there is no favoritism." If you do a sloppy job at work, you will lose the opportunity for service and you will be given a less valuable or satisfying realm of labor in the eternal life. All this is being settled now. That is why Jesus could say, "He that is faithful in little shall be given authority over much." We ought to keep this clearly in mind as we go about our work.

On the other side are the apostle's words to masters.

"Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair because you know that you also have a master in heaven."

Employers, be concerned about how generously and justly you treat your workers! Again, it is all to be done in light of the Great Appraisal which is yet to come, when hearts will be revealed. Here is revealed God's concern for justice and fairness. One of the commentators suggests that perhaps in those days of slavery masters were being gently exhorted here to provide means by which slaves could build up a financial fund whereby they could eventually buy their freedom. Thus, in time, conditions and attitudes toward slavery would change and the practice would disappear from the empire. That, in fact, is what eventually happened. Without a violent overthrow, without revolution of any kind, the preaching and teaching of equality in Christ changed the atmosphere of the Roman Empire and slaves at last were set free.

Finally, there comes a paragraph of general counsel on Christian response to daily circumstances. How do you live today, in a world given over to false values, with much conflict, shame, and degrading practices? How should we then live? Here are Paul's words:

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I

am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."

Prayer ought to be a central practice of our lives. Notice how the apostle puts it: "watch and pray." That brings to mind the words of Jesus to Peter, James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane. He said to them, "watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." They did not obey him but fell asleep, unaware of the danger they were in. Consequently, Peter denied his Lord, and James and John fled in the darkness, like all the others, and abandoned the Lord.

This word underscores the awareness that we live in a dangerous world. We are under subtle attack all the time, and we ought to be aware of what that is doing to our lives---how it robs us of our joy, takes away our peace, or restricts our love, changing us and making us dull and shallow in our reactions. When you sense something lessening spiritual vigor in your life, pray that God will restore it. And not only pray for yourself but, as Paul suggests here, pray for others too, for open doors for those who are ministering. Paul is in prison, limited, in chains, and he is asking that God will set him free to proclaim this magnificent message, "the mystery of Christ." Earlier in this letter we learned what that is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is the central message of the Christian faith. It is a new way to live: Jesus Christ in you. By his grace and strength you can be what you ought to be! That is what Paul wants freedom to declare. Christianity is indeed a revolutionary, even a dangerous movement. The church is a dangerous body of people. Turned loose in this world the church will challenge many things that are going on around us. And it ought to do so. We will find ourselves in trouble at times. That is why we need to "watch and pray."

Yet further, we need to be sensitive, to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders. "Make the most of every opportunity." That is the sensitive thing to do. Listen to the way you talk. What do non-Christians think of the way you act? Dr. Richard Halverson, the Senate Chaplain, told me once of a home Bible study he had attended where both Christians and non-Christians were present. One man opened the class in prayer, and while he was praying, Dick, like many of us at times do, was saying a quiet "Amen, amen," to what the man prayed. The next morning the man said to him, "I was very grateful to have you at the class last night. But when I was praying I kept hearing you say, 'Amen.' Have you considered what the non-Christians present thought of that? They are not used to that kind of thing. They must have thought you were a fanatic. They probably felt uncomfortable." Dick Halverson had the grace to say, "I appreciate that man. I'm glad he pointed that out to me." In the early days when we had a number of large evangelistic home Bible studies, one of the problems we faced was from Christians, reflecting a self-righteous attitude, who raised questions that made others feel uncomfortable. That is terribly wrong. Here Paul reminds us to be sensitive and wise in the way we act, but to make the most of every opportunity. Because the days are evil, opportunities for witness abound on every side.

The final word is, be gracious!

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Graciousness means to be pleasant and courteous, to be easy to live with. What we have to say may make people mad, finally, but the way we say it is very important. Here the apostle takes note of this. "Saltiness" is not pungent, obscene phrases thrown into the conversation.

Today we say someone is "salty" because he uses profane language, but that is not what is meant here. It means conversation that is flavored with attractive ideas so that listeners are stimulated, their curiosity aroused.

I have always appreciated what Ron Ritchie does when he meets people on planes. It has been my experience, and Ron's too, that when I am asked what I do for a living and I reply, "I'm a preacher," a curtain descends immediately; the conversation is ended. But Ron has found a way to get around this. When he is asked what he does for a living, he replies, "I'm a teacher." Then when he is asked what he teaches, he says, "I teach people about Jesus if they want to listen." That puts the onus back on the questioner: "Do you want to listen or don't you? If you don't want to, that's fine with me. But if you want to listen, I want to tell you about Someone who is very important to me." That has opened many doors for him. That is graceful conversation, talk that is "seasoned with salt." It is pungent and stimulating, and follows the suggestion of the apostle on

how to live in a confused world.

So let us apply all this to our own lives. Let us begin at home, and from there move out into all of life, putting off the old ways and putting on our new life, with Jesus in our hearts, living gracious, sensitive, but salty lives!

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