

From Preaching to Meddling

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Colossians 3:18-4:1

When a pastor says something in a sermon that you do not like, goes the old joke, the pastor has “gone from preaching to meddling.” The pastor no longer tells pleasant and comforting stories. The pastor no longer entertains with enjoyably convicting stories about someone else’s sins. The pastor starts interfering with your life.

It appears that in Colossians, Paul has gone from preaching to meddling.

“*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord,*” Paul writes. “*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord,*” he continues. “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything,*” he concludes. There’s something here to offend the majority of the population.

We might be tempted to skip these hard verses. I think that’s a missed opportunity. Here’s a chance to do two things. We can witness the collision between Christian values and the culture of ancient Rome. And we can see how things have changed since then.

Jesus changes how we live. It’s pretty simple, but it’s not always clear to people. **Jesus changes how we live.**

Let’s start with slaves. In just a few verses we’re going to hear a familiar name—Onesimus. Those of you who participated in the Bible study on Philemon know this name. Onesimus was the slave who ran away from his master, Philemon. Then Onesimus met Paul and became a Christian.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon urging him to put their Christian connection ahead of any desire to punish Onesimus. “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly,” Paul says, “for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” This is quite a demand in a culture where masters could execute slaves for passing gas in public.

Paul’s appeal worked. In a few verses we will read that Onesimus is the one delivering Paul’s letter to the Colossians. If early church tradition is accurate, this same Onesimus became the first Christian bishop of the Colossian churches.

Following Jesus meant changing the relationship between masters and slaves. It was Christians who brought about the abolition of slavery in both Great Britain and the United States. Following Jesus puts us at the forefront of efforts to combat human trafficking in our own time. And following Jesus requires that we admit and combat the systemic racism in our broken society.

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In Greek and Roman culture, children were not really considered persons until age thirteen or so. One of the primary methods of birth control was to take unwanted children and leave them at the

city dump. If they survived they were pressed into slavery or prostitution. “*Fathers,*” Paul urges, “*do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.*”

Where are the words to the mothers? Paul must not be too worried about that. He is worried about spiritually absent, emotionally distant and practically uninvolved fathers. We dads and grandpas has a special responsibility in the faith lives of our children. As a whole, we are failing. Men, we must step up and be spiritual examples in our homes and in our church.

Children are precious gifts from God, not merely carriers of genetic information. Christians created the first orphanages and foundling homes in the western world. We continue to serve children through hundreds of social service agencies in this country alone. And for that we can give thanks.

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Sometimes Paul is accused of being a woman-hater. In fact, over half of his co-workers in the gospel were women. The pastors at Philippi were women. He describes women as his fellow soldiers in mission at the end of Romans. In Acts, Lydia is described as one of his most important financial backers.

His words here describe a mutuality between husbands and wives that was unknown in the ancient Greco-Roman world. “*Husbands,*” Paul commands, “*love your wives and never treat them harshly.*” In many ancient households, wives were little more than property. Paul demands a mutuality of care and appreciation that was unknown in such societies. And Christians continue to lead the fight against spousal abuse and the exploitation of women in sex trades.

What are these verses doing here? Paul is applying his previous words to real life communities. This is what the new life in Christ looks like. Christian community trumps all other relationships. Slaves and masters are part of the same family. Husbands and wives are brothers and sisters in the Messiah. Parents are challenged to root and ground their children in the love of Jesus.

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If those things have changed, for the better, then we can be comfortable with other changes as well. We have found our way to welcome and embrace our sisters and brothers of all sexual orientations. We strive to welcome and embrace our sisters and brothers from other cultures and language groups. We seek to welcome and embrace our sisters and brothers who struggle with mental illness or who live with a criminal past.

We expect Jesus to have an impact on them. We expect that because Jesus has that impact on us. **Jesus changes how we live.** If that doesn't happen, then maybe it's not about Jesus.

Let's pray to be changed...

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