

# Colossians Session #4: 3.1-4.1

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As we move into chapter three St. Paul moves onto the other “issue” that has befallen the Church in Colossae – pagan worship. We will see that in many ways the upcoming verses parallel the last eighteen (2:6-23). Rather than falling prey to the false teachings of the Judaizers, other Gentile Christians are in the grasp of reverting back to elements of their previous pagan lifestyle. Once again, St. Paul will remind these pagan

worshipping Christians that they too have united themselves with Christ and have died to their old ways of being so that they might rise to new life in Christ.

## **Glory of God 3:1-7**

**3:1-2 *seek what is above:*** At first glance we can understand these verses as speaking to our call to live eternally with God, to pursue as our final, the gates of heaven. But to attain heaven we must understand how we are meant to live here on earth. So, this phrase is more about grasping an *attitude*, an *orientation* than it is about a *location*. In becoming Christian, if we have truly died to our worldly ways and seek to rise with Christ, then the concerns and desires of this world should not dominate our attention. As Christians this does NOT mean that we are to separate ourselves from the world. As long as we live, we live in the present world with its culture, deceptions and worthless pursuits calling to all, all the time. As Christians, having put on our Armor of God (See Ephesians 6:10-20) we walk through the world relating to all that we encounter with love, mercy, forgiveness... putting our faith in the gospel, not in the false promises of the world, because we know that Christ reigns victorious over the world and is sovereign over all of creation ***seated at the right hand of God***. Through the grace of baptism, we are sharers in Christ’s sovereignty as adopted sons and daughters.

**3:3-4 *your life is hidden with Christ:*** In my own struggle to understand elements of St. Paul’s teaching this idea of “hidden with or in Christ” has often alluded me. But stick with anything long enough and understanding eventually is granted. St. Paul is speaking of the heavenly, glorious life that awaits us. So many days, as I drive home I wonder where is this beautiful, peaceful, loving world that Christ has called me too. I certainly don’t see it around me. But like a gift that life is waiting for me, for you and like a birthday or Christmas gift bought and wrapped days, weeks, months before the celebration, it is hidden away for the day it can be revealed. Our work, our process to turn away from sin will eventually lead us to heaven when we ***too will appear with him in glory***.

**3:5 *put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly:*** One of the great gifts of the Catholic Church (and those others that follow similar patterns) is the gift of the liturgical seasons. We are meant to struggle with the *stripping off* the evils of this world, the selfish, unloving, prideful actions that consume our lives all year long but Lent is meant to be a special season of devotion to this task. While there are those who can do this “stripping” and completely change their lives around most of us must work on a layer at a time. St. Paul is calling for those Christians of the Colossae Church who

converted from paganism to leave behind their old ways but using the image of “stripping off” the old ways of **immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and the greed that is idolatry**. These are **earthly** ways and behavior and are counter to living in Christ. St. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:5: *Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure or greedy person, that is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

**3:6 the wrath of God is coming:** The term *the wrath of God* primarily comes from the Old Testament and is human language to confer the concept of God’s divine judgement and punishment for sin. Unlike human anger, God’s wrath is neither arbitrary or impulsive but always comes from a place of justice. *A helpful analogy: the light of the sun is necessary for exercising the sense of vision; however, if we relate to the sun inappropriately – for example, by looking directly at it – the injury that follows does not come from some evil intent of the sun but from our faulty way of relating to what is in itself a great good. God’s holiness hurts if we reject it.* Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, by Dennis Hamm, SJ

### **Stripping Off the Old Self 3:8-11**

In this section St. Paul turns to discuss the positive behavior that should come with the decision to live life according to the gospel. Once again, using the image of baptism and the stripping away of the old ways, St. Paul calls to all to *put on the new self*, one that comes from belief in Jesus Christ.

**3:8 now you must put them all away:** Like folding our pre-baptismal clothes, dirty with sin and laying them to the side, St. Paul is calling for that same stepping away from five major vices: **anger, fury, malice, slander and obscene language**. The first three sins can manifest themselves in a number of ways, but the added phrase **out of your mouths** makes many scholars believe that St. Paul is meaning all five as sins of speech. There is a link between our interior life and our speech. While everyone can “play act” any part of their lives, most of us show our true colors by the comments and statements we make while in conversation with others.

**3:9 Stop lying to one another:** This confirms the idea that what St. Paul is speaking about are sins of speech.

**3:10 put on the new self:** After putting away the pre-baptismal clothes and walking into the waters of baptism, one must now put on clean new clothes – the new self. But St. Paul acknowledges that this “new self” is a process by continuing **which is being renewed, for knowledge**. In other words, the new self is changing and growing in strength and brilliance as we add the knowledge of faith into our lives. The more we know the more we can grow in our faith.

**3:11 not Greek and Jews, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free:** Here we have four contrasting pairs. You should note that the first two pair – Greek and Jews, circumcision and uncircumcision – are basically saying the same thing but in reverse. In Colossae all those who were not Jews would be Greek gentiles. And at that time only Jews were circumcised leaving gentiles to be the uncircumcised. To call one “Barbarian” is a Greek-speakers way of naming those who do not share the Greek culture but non-the-less were free persons. A Scythian is someone north of the black sea, which would be present day Moldova and the Ukraine. In the time of St.

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Paul's writing, those Scythians living in Greece were almost all slaves. So, the first two comparisons were identifying the same people but a mirror image of the other; so too are the second set and also as a mirror image of the other. The reality of the real world these distinctions were important, but as the body of Christ we are to transcend all that divides us focusing only on that which unites us, because as Christians we believe that **Christ is all and in all**. Because Jesus is in all of us, because all of us make up the body of Christ there should be no difference in spiritual status among true Christians. In the letter to the Galatians (3:27-28) we read St. Paul's similar words: *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew or Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

### **Therefore, Put on Love 3:12-16**

**3:12 Put on then:** Now that St. Paul has admonished the pagans-turned Christians about their slipping back into old ways; he offers the direction of their life that they sought to turn towards in their baptismal promises. St. Paul matches the five vices found in verse eight with five virtues: **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**. These are the virtues that he also calls all Christians to in his universal letter identified as Ephesians (4:1-3). St. Paul's identification of *humility* here stands in contrast to the "self-abasement" we discussed in 2:18. Our faith calls us to authentic humility, humility that pleases God and is what comes when we defer to one another in community life. It is the authentic recognizing the gifts, talents and abilities of another as well as recognizing the gifts, talents and abilities of our own truly come from God. This humility of a true Christian stands in contrast to the "self-abasement" of someone who only wants to "look good" to those around so puts themselves down verbally but all the while agreeing in their heart with the compliment.

**3:13 bearing with one another:** To the list offered in verse twelve, St. Paul adds those practices that are essential to a Christian community that means to honor God. There are two more essential actions that must take place. The first is to *bear with one another*. What does that mean? It means to live in understand one another's weaknesses and foibles. It means to not expect or put yourself in the center of all events, conversations and activities. It means to understand that everyone is struggling with their own burdens and wrestling with their own conflicts. So, if on any particular day someone seems distracted or unpleasant don't take it personally or don't allow their mood or interaction to determine yours. And if someone hurts or causes you pain, **forgive one another**. This is the second action of a Christian community.

**3:14 put on love:** If we think of the virtues shared in verses and actions in verses twelve and thirteen as the various parts of a garment, then love is the stitching that binds it all together making the garment complete. Love is the **bond of perfection** in the sense that it completes and unifies the virtues. Love is also, and more importantly, what perfects the virtues and leads us towards maturity. To explain further – I can show kindness and gentleness or seek to forgive someone but I can do it without or with love for the other. Being on the receiving end kindness without love is still appreciated. But kindness given with love with means respect and connectedness with the other brings the two together in union, which is of Christ.

**3:15 peace of Christ:** There are two ways to understand “peace”. Most understand it from the political military standpoint of peace defined as the absence of war. The second is to understand it from the religious definition of shalom. Shalom means so much more. More than the absence of war, but also the inclusion of rightness in relationships that only comes from self-giving, self-denying love. St. Paul writes “peace” here speaking of the idea of shalom. But it is meant to draw us back to 1:20 when he says: *though him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.* In both places St. Paul speaks of shalom but wants his readers to understand that the only way we will know this kind of peace is through living a life worthy of Christ. Jesus, by dying on the cross made shalom possible but we must live it each and every day by allowing the peace of Christ to **control your hearts**. And how do we do that? The verb for “control” is another rare word, used only here in the New Testament and carries with it the connotation of decisiveness. We must DECIDE, CHOOSE, WANT, DESIRE peace in our hearts and lives and then act to make it happen by...

**3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you:** In this last verse of this section St. Paul goes on to give practical answers to how one lives in the peace of Christ. What he places before us is four choices we must make and live within.

1. **Working to have the word of Christ dwell within us** -- What is the Word of God/Christ? Scripture. And how can it dwell in our hearts and lives? We must read it. Study it. Memorize it. Live by it. The scriptures are the Word of God. God’s teachings and messages to us. The gospels are the words and teachings of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. The letters are explanations and understandings of all that we find in the bible. The more we know the more the Word will dwell within us.
2. **Teach and admonish one another:** One of the reasons I started teaching a bible study is so that I could know and understand scripture. It is one thing to learn something but you must know it at a deeper level if you are going to teach it. Teaching the faith, teaching scripture is a humbling but powerful challenge in one’s life. To admonish means to warn, advise, urge, warmly reprimand. No where in that list is the word criticize, condemn or complain. To admonish someone is to speak to them out of love and mercy.
3. **Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs:** Not everyone appreciates the power of music but those who do understand that music can not only change our “tune” in life but our heart and mind. St. Augustine said, “To sing is to pray twice”. Singing at Mass is no mere ornament. The prayers we pray, the readings proclaimed, gifts offered AND the music selected all interweave to create one “perfect” prayer. We don’t sing to show off our voices, (and we shouldn’t remain silent embarrassed by our voices); we sing to proclaim Christ, to honor God and to communicate God’s Word to our heart.
4. **With gratitude in your hearts to God:** Having an attitude of gratitude changes our whole outlook on life. As one who struggles to reform my negative thinking and approach to life, by simply stopping my unconstructive thoughts and focusing on the positive stops a

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downward spiral to my day and puts me into a whole different disposition. God has given us so much. Focusing on that allows us to give much to those around us.

### The Household Code 3:17-4:1

For those who have been with this study since the beginning of the year, as we study this section you will hear what we have already studied in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. If you remember from our introductory comments, there is a good chance that St. Paul, in writing Colossians saw the universal nature of the message and wanting to communicate these ideas later wrote Ephesians. (Please remember that scholars agree, while the Letter to the Ephesians is identified with this once community, the letter was intended to be sent out to all the Churches as a common homily or teaching. Ephesians was written as a universal letter, a circular letter.) It is possible that St. Paul sent Tychicus off, in company of Onesimus with three letters – one to the community at Colossae (where Philemon lived), one to be delivered to his friend, Philemon and after delivering the first two, to take one (the letter we now know as Ephesians) to all the churches in what is present day central and western Turkey. What we have here in this section of the letter inspired the lengthier teaching in Ephesians.

As we move forward into today's study there are several points to keep in mind:

1. First and foremost, we must remember the teaching found in the letter to the Ephesians. *"Be subordinate to one another out of reverence to Christ."* (Ephesians 5:21) This is the foundation upon which Christians are to base ALL their relationships. We are to approach it as one of service to the other.
2. St. Paul talks to each group as if all are equal. As I have discussed in the past, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, women, children and slaves were all property. It would have been expected for St. Paul speaking only to the master/husband/parent and inform them his expectations of the "underlings" conduct. St. Paul shows his respect for each of these "lesser beings" by directing his comments directly to them.
3. Another unexpected honor is that St. Paul directs his comments FIRST to women, children and slaves talking to the husband/parent/master second. Protocol of the day would have him talking first to those with authority and if he must then to the lesser.
4. St. Paul challenges the culture of the time by asking masters/husbands to be merciful, compassionate and considerate to those in their charge; essentially to treat them like people rather than possessions.

Knowing that this document was written before Ephesians we must study this section in conversation with the Ephesians teaching.

**3:17 whatever you do:** Most scholarship edit this text giving this verse as the ending of the teaching in the section 3:12-16; but, there is a growing number of modern scholars who believe this statement is an introduction into the teaching regarding household conduct and living fully under the authority of Christ.

**3:18 wives, be subordinate to your husbands:** See Handout on Submission. Scholars offer that the Greek implies that the wife's submission is a free and voluntary gift in the relationship, not degrading herself or being forced into servitude or happening by coercion. In continuing in the verse with **as is proper in the Lord**, St. Paul is putting the submission within the context of Christ. This gift is done as an understanding of submitting to her husband as one submits to Christ in devotion and leadership, but it should never be unconditional always placing God's will before her husband's. We read in Acts 5:29: *Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.* This verse in light of the whole passage and other verses from St. Paul's writings we can know that St. Paul understands the sacramental nature of Christian marriage as a loving partnership between spouses of equal worth and dignity. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3:28. St. Paul is asking wives to yield as a sincere expression of their submission to Christ. This said submission that is victimization, exploitative or abuse to the wife is NOT supported in scripture or the Catholic Church.

**3:19 Husbands love your wives:** In Ephesians this statement would continue with *as Christ loves the Church* (Ephesians 5:25). Men who truly understand this passage have expressed that it is one of the hardest verses in the bible. Not because of the call to love their wives but because of the extraordinary expectation of the level of commitment. While there are those husbands who would die for their wives and children, the challenge to love as Christ loves means in their daily commitment it is a challenge to ALWAYS put their wives best interests at the forefront of every decision. To daily cherish them and always seek for their good is a burden with our sinful nature. While there may be cause to physically die for the other, it is the death of the ego and personal desires that come every day that is what is expected in this teaching. The love St. Paul speaks of us not *eros* or romantic/sexual love. The Greek word used here is *agape* meaning the "great love" attributed to God. It is a love that comes from a deliberate choice of the will and does not depend on the wife's worthiness or personal response. This is the love that Jesus had for us when he went to the cross. We didn't earn or deserve his sacrifice and as a gift, has been spurned by many. But knowing Christ still went to the Cross. A husband's mission is to work hard to build up his wife, marriage and family seeing the home as a "domestic church". In St. Paul's vision of the partnership in marriage the husband is not to demean or dominate the wife and family for selfish ends.

**3:20 Children, obey your parents:** No surprises here. Obedience is the expectation for all who are without power. But St. Paul adds more. He goes on to write **for this is pleasing to the Lord**. This short phrase places obedience within a context. That context is our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We do this not only because it is the "right" thing to do but because we belong to the righteous. We therefore are called as children to obey our parents because in our relationship with Jesus Christ because it is the virtuous and upright thing to do. By the way, as adults we are no longer obligated to obey our parents but we must always treat them with love and respect. We honor them because they gave us the gift of life. It is the fourth commandment: *Honor your father and mother* (Exodus 20:12).

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**3:21 Fathers, do not provoke your children:** In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, males had absolute power especially in the home. Many abused that dominance by being inconsiderate, abusive, disrespectful and self-serving. When we lay too heavy of a burden on our children through destructive discipline or expecting unreasonable restraint or control, we create tears in the relationship that come out in a number of ways, one being anger. So, what are we to do? Let us look to Ephesians 6:4 to better understand how parents are to raise their children. *but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* How is one to do that? Let us turn to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

- **2222** Parents must regard their children as children of God and respect them as human persons. Showing themselves obedient to the will of the Father in heaven, they educate their children to fulfill God's law.
- **2223** Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for education in the virtues. This requires an apprenticeship in self-denial, sound judgment, and self-mastery - the preconditions of all true freedom. Parents should teach their children to subordinate the "material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones." Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children. By knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them

All this said we who have adult children can look back over our parenting years and beat ourselves up with the "should have's" of our own human failings. We need to remember we do the best we can with what we have. We also need to acknowledge that our contemporary culture, which consumes many of our adult children, is at battle for their attention. And frankly, it is easier to go along with the crowd than to stand against it. Doesn't make it right but hopefully brings some ease to our hearts.

**3:21-22 Slaves, obey your human masters:** The first and foundational teaching from St. Paul is to call for a slave to be obedient. A word we have heard already in regard to children towards their parents (3:20). St. Paul goes on to describe the slaves attitude saying to do what you are told **not only when being watched....** I remember as a Junior High student a teacher was called to the office or out into the hall to confer with the principal. We were instructed to read quietly or work quietly until their return. The student closest to the door would "keep watch" so that everyone else could talk, move from their seats, or do as they pleased. Our belief was that the teacher was none the wiser. St. Paul is challenging this idea that the eyes we should be concerned about are not the direct authority over us (boss, teacher, employer) but to do what is asked because it pleases God that we do so. Obedience should be motivated **in sincerity of heart... fearing the Lord.** Our will choosing to do the right thing. In faith we are to recognize that we have been "bought" by the blood of Christ. We belong to Him. Moses spoke of his relationship to God as being a slave to God's will and purpose (1 Kings 8:53; Nehemiah 10:30). St. Paul uses the imagery of slavery in talking about his relationship with Jesus (Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10). As we have discussed in Ephesians, all Christians are to be in

service to those around us. *Identifying oneself as a slave of Christ, called to whole-hearted service, is a spiritual attitude that can benefit any Christ bound to a task he or she did not choose.* Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Ephesians.

**3:23-24 do from the heart:** You will notice that St. Paul spent one verse with each of the four preceding relationships. Scholars have no idea why he now spends five on the relationship of slave to master. Some conjecture that there may have been some issues due to the common sharing of faith. Maybe slaves not doing their work and showing disrespect at home believing that in their faith the slave no longer has responsibility to the master. The focus of this relationship as with all relationships is to see the Christ within the other and to serve Christ within the other. It is easy to take care of those people we love and like, but when forced or out of obligation St. Paul is saying “Then image the other is Jesus and serve them **as for the Lord and not for others.**” This way, if in serving other you do that work *from the heart* and with respect and love, then **you will receive from the Lord the due payment** at the end of time. Most of us feel a sense of entrapment in relationships in our lives – employee in a job, in-laws, harsh neighbors... Rather than dwell on the difficulties and unrealistic expectation, the lack of a simple “Thank you”, turn the relationship into one that honors God by honoring, respecting and serving the other. Act as if you are the **slaves of the Lord Christ** and that you are to treat the other with love, respect and kindness.

**3:25 there is no partiality:** And if you don’t win your “master” over with kindness, then don’t worry for they **will receive recompense for the wrong committed.** There is a final judgement. There an ongoing relationship that I have been involved with for years.

**4:1 a master in heaven:** Finally, in this last verse of the section on the household code, St. Paul turns his attention to the masters that keeps in the flavor of what he has been saying throughout. Masters are to **treat your slaves justly and fairly.** And if it is not enough to do this because of the teachings of the gospels and the command of St. Paul then do it because their will be a final judgement in which the masters will be held accountable for their actions and attitudes. St. Paul challenges them to realize that as believers their relationship should be lived out with Jesus as their master.

Final Comment on the household code: These verses here and the ones in the letter to the Ephesians have been used to justify horrible abuse and exploitation. Anyone who has truly studied the work of St. Paul would say that was NEVER his intent. St. Paul’s posture in his work for Christ was one of a loving dutiful slave to a beloved kind, merciful master, and out of this posture he understood all relationships. You CANNOT take one side of the equation (wife/husband, child/parent, slave/master) without its counterpart. Submission by one done freely as a way of honoring Christ is a prayer and when reciprocated by the submission and love of the other brings harmony, peace (shalom) and a foretaste of heaven. When it is done without the reciprocation of the other it will be difficult and not always possible. I am reminded of the Serenity Prayer that may help if one finds themselves in that second reciprocal relationship: “*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

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## Reflection Questions:

1. In section 3:12-17 we read a list of virtues. Which is the most, and least characteristic of you?  
Can you think of practical ways to improve?
2. Reread St. Paul's words in the section we have called Household Code of Conduct (3:17-4:1).  
Look at each of the pairs of relationship interpreting slave to master as maybe employee/boss.  
How are you doing as a spouse? ... as a parent or child? As an employee or boss?

## Catechism of the Catholic Church

Charity (Love): 1822-1829

Christ at the Right Hand of God: 659-667

Different Kinds of Sin: 1852-1853

Prayer of Praise: 2639-2649

Risen with Christ: 1002-1004

Singing and Music: 1156-1157

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- The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters
- New Collegeville Bible Commentary: First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon by Terence J. Keegan
- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, by Dennis Hamm, SJ
- [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org)