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Colossians 3:20

17th Message

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CHILDREN OF THE AGES

SERIES: *THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #1

A few months ago I was having dinner with my dear friends John and Mary Felstiner, both Stanford professors and both devout Jews. We were having a wonderful dialog about life and Mary said to me, “Brian, I just found this wonderful verse by the Apostle Paul,” which she then read out loud:

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:17 TNIV)

“Brian,” she said, “I don’t live that way, do you live that way?” She wanted to know all about the verse and especially what it meant to give thanks to the Father through Jesus.

Today we are beginning a nine week summer series in Colossians 3:18-4:1, where Paul explains in relational terms exactly what it means when he said “whatever you do in word and deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” The series is an excellent follow up to our recent series in Isaiah 54-55, where God promised to restore his relationship with his people by a new and better covenant that would unleash his unconditional love and everlasting compassion upon Israel and the world. The prophet concluded the Book of Comfort (chaps. 40-55) with the call to the exiles to “return to the Lord” and to come home.

As we resume our studies in Colossians, we will examine how the New Covenant radically transforms all of our relationships, especially in the home. C. S. Lewis writes, “If the home is to be a means of grace it must be a place of rules...the alternative to rule is not freedom but the unconstitutional (and often unconscious) tyranny of the most selfish member.”¹ As we will see in the coming weeks, the most radical transformation was aimed at the men, who were no longer allowed to wield absolute power over their wives, children and slaves, but were to imitate Christ as servant leaders, nurturing and loving those under their care.

The Basis for New Testament Ethics

Before we look at Paul’s specific commands, we need to remember the context in which these commands were given, which gives the basis for New Testament ethics.² Paul begins chapter 3 with the idea that all behavior stems from our new identity in Christ:

Since then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Col 3:1)

1. Christian behavior is not based on our determination to obey religious rules or Old Testament laws, but on our union with Christ in his death and resurrection.
2. With the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the new creation has broken into this age and will continue into the age to come.

3. In our identification with Christ, we have already laid aside the “old man” (our sinful life in Adam), and have “put on” the “new man” (Christ himself who renews us and gives us the power to obey).

G. K. Beale explains Paul’s imagery of “putting off” and “putting on” in his newest work, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*:

The imagery of removing old clothing and donning new clothing in Col 3:9-10 may be alluding to Gen 3. Gen 3:7 says that Adam and Eve, directly after their sin, tried to cover their sinful nakedness by their own autonomous efforts: “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin covering.” However, in an apparent expression of their beginning restoration to God after the fall, Gen 3:21 says, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.” The clear implication is that their first suit of clothes was taken off and replaced by divinely made clothing, indicating that the humanly made clothing was associated with their alienated condition and sinful shame (Gen 3:7-11) and was insufficient covering for those who have begun to be reconciled to God.³

4. Paul’s commands to “put off” and “put on” are exhortations to live in accordance with who we already are in Christ, as new creatures of the new creation. The Stoics of Paul’s day “based their teaching on the law of nature: this is the way the world is, so this is how you must live in harmony with it.” Paul bases his teaching on the law of the *new* nature: “Christ releases you to be truly human, and you must now learn to express your true self according to the divine pattern, not in self-assertion but in self giving.”⁴
5. Although the “new man” is not perfected, we are growing in our new-creational existence as the “new man” “is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:10 NASB). Beale notes the reference to “true knowledge” may also “echo the Genesis context, where ‘knowledge’ was at the heart of the fall (cf. Gen 2:17: “From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”).”⁵
6. To foster this renewal, Paul exhorts us to immerse ourselves in “the word of Christ” allowing it to take root in our hearts through a steady diet of teaching, reflection and worship (3:15).
7. The evidence of our renewal is evidenced in loving relationships (3:14).

Having set forth the basis for our obedience in our union with Christ, Paul sets forth some basic guidelines within household relationships – wives and husbands; children and parents; and slaves and masters. As today is Graduation Sunday, we will begin in verse 20 with Paul’s word to children, instead of his instruction to wives in verse 18. This morning I would like to trace the development of parent-child relationship through the five stages as they are transformed by the gospel.

1. The obedience of children to loving and nurturing parents
2. Gradual independence in young adulthood
3. Crossing the threshold to adulthood
4. Reconnecting to parents as an adult friend
5. Honoring parents by loving and nurturing them

I. Stage 1: Childhood Obedience (Col 3:20)

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. (Col 3:20 ESV)

As Tom Wright observes, “In addressing children as members of the church in their own right, and in giving them both responsibilities and rights, Paul is again allowing the gospel to break new ground.”⁶ I would agree, for the gospel radically transformed the authority structures within the family. The Greek term “obey” is derived from the verb “to hear” and is similar to the Hebrew term *šāma* “to hear, obey.” It implies a readiness to listen with the intent of carrying out instructions. In Acts 12:13 it means “to answer a knock at the door, technically of the door-keeper, whose duty it is to listen for the signals of those who wish to enter, and to admit them if they are entitled to do so.”⁷

The emphasis on obedience takes the focus of the child off himself and extends it outwards, serving others in a world that is much larger than his or hers. It puts to death a child’s natural born selfishness and rewards them with the joy of serving others out of love, not duty. The phrase “in everything” assumes a Christian context and keeps the child’s outlook consistent, preventing any seed of selfishness, no matter how small, from taking root. To disobey in anything is rebellion and destructive to the bonds of love and trust within the home.

It’s important to note that the motive is not to please the parents, but to please the Lord. The ultimate goal of Christian parenting is not to raise children to be happy, nor to get into the college of their choice, nor to be the best athlete, nor secure a prestigious, well-paying job. No, the goal is to raise children to be followers of Jesus, to know him, to love him, and to be led by him. As the sage writes, “Children are a gift of the Lord” (Ps 127:3), but they are the Lord’s, not ours. At an early age the child is taught to look beyond their parents to the Lord, and to seek his good pleasure. As Tom Wright observes,

Obedience must never be made the condition of parental ‘love’; a ‘love’ so conditioned would not deserve the name. When the parent is obedient to the vocation of genuine love, the child’s obedience may become, like that of the Christian to God, a glad a loving response. Such obedience is ‘pleasing to the Lord’, not merely because he desires order but because he wants all his people to follow the often paradoxical, self-denying, Christ-like road to true and mature selfhood.⁸

As Jesus said to would-be followers, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) Obedience can be difficult, sacrificing one’s interests and desires for the good of the home; but when done in the context of love and trust, it prepares the child to follow Christ down difficult roads and into dark valleys, knowing that the Lord can be trusted for the ultimate outcome. I was not raised in a Christian home, but it was a loving and nurturing home, and as a result I took great delight in obeying my parents, as well as other adults.

II. Stage 2: Obedience Within Growing Independence (Luke 2:41-52)

Luke gives us the first recorded words of Jesus who, at the age of twelve, feels free to seek instruction from his heavenly Father outside the purview of his parents. Joseph and Mary had gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. The journey took place in Jesus’ twelfth year, the year prior to becoming “son of the covenant” (presently celebrated as a boy’s *Bar Mitzvah*). During that year Jewish boys would normally take on intensive instruction to prepare themselves for the ceremony, which is what Jesus appears to be doing. In fact, he is so caught up in questioning the Jewish scribes and teachers that he is unaware that his parents had left for home.

As is common in family life, faulty assumptions can lead to trouble. Mary and Joseph assume their son is with relatives; Jesus assumes his parents know where he is. It is not until the caravan is one day out that they discover he is not with them; it takes another day to return, and still another to find him calmly discoursing in the temple. Mary, speaking for both parents, complains, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” If you’re a parent you know well the trauma; it’s happened to Emily and I more than once.

And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:49-52)

Jesus’ reply is astonishing, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must (*dei*, “it is necessary”) be in my Father’s house?” Jesus’ reply reveals his “sense of priority and includes a reference to the *necessity* of the task” (*dei*, “it is necessary”— used strategically in the Gospel where elements of Jesus’ mission are set forth, here it speaks of Jesus’ relationship to the Father).⁹ Though he is Joseph and Mary’s son, “*it is necessary*” for him to be in his Father’s house, which highlights a significant note of intimacy that will take precedence over all relationships. His parents cannot come to terms with his answer, but Jesus remains submissive to his parents’ authority and returns home. His self-submission lasts seventeen more years, until his baptism and public ministry.

Though it can be dangerous to compare Jesus’ call and upbringing to our own, I think certain comparisons might be helpful. First, the text may suggest that just as Jesus remained submissive within the context of his home until the Lord called him into public ministry, that children do likewise until they leave the home for the public sphere and are financially independent.

Second, Mary and Joseph’s astonishment suggests how difficult it is for parents to discern God’s calling for their children. The reason is that our spiritual gifts are sovereignly given by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4, 7) and have no relation to our DNA, personality, talents or intellect. Growing up, I had little aptitude for language, literature or public speaking. My SAT scores in English were 470 (out of 800). My junior high drama teacher called me a “mush mouth” and said that I would never make it in public speaking. Math became my sole refuge and is why I chose to major in economics in college. But after I became a Christian, I sought out the wisdom of godly adults who expanded my vision and pushed me into new areas I could have

never imagined. The result is that I now love languages, poetry, and literature, and have an aversion to math.

Having raised three daughters, I've come to realize that I was the least qualified to discern their calling before the Lord. I remember how disappointed I was when my eldest dropped out of college during her sophomore year. Now she's married with three children and completing her degree in nursing. Looking back, I'm incredibly grateful for people like Pat Harrison, Molly Nonnenberg, Mark and Liz Bucko and Elsie Kirchhofer for helping my daughters to know and follow Christ.

Third and perhaps most important, parents must recognize the necessity to create time and space for their children to develop a spiritual life. It's never too early for a child to seek and cultivate relationship with God that is both personal and authentic. And it doesn't take much prodding to ignite their interest, but it does take time.

I suspect the greatest threat to the spiritual development of our children is not secularism, but something far more insidious – perfectionism. Perfectionism – the destructive doorway to higher education. The quest for perfectionism is destroying our youth today. It infects every aspect of their lives, from academics to athletics. It kills creativity, spontaneity and joy, and robs them of rest and reflection. As parents we feel powerless to combat it and so resign ourselves to go along with it. The problem is, you can pursue perfection, but it comes with a devastating price: your child pulls it off, performing perfectly all the way through college, only to arrive back home with no idea of who they are. Lacking passion they become discouraged and depressed, and sadly, many become suicidal. For this reason I see great value in encouraging high school seniors to take a gap year, in order to step off the academic treadmill and do volunteer work, or short-term missions, or whatever. When they return to prepare for their vocation, hopefully they will have an anchored spiritual identity, and a better knowledge of who God has called them to be.

III. Stage 3: Crossing the Threshold to Adulthood (John 2; Mark 3:20-35)

The third stage of the parent-child relationship takes place when a child crosses the threshold into adulthood. Two incidents in the life of Jesus capture the new dimensions in this stage of the parent-child relationship. The first occurs at a wedding in Cana, a village about nine miles north of Nazareth. "That Jesus, his mother and disciples were all invited suggests the wedding was for a relative or close family friend."¹⁰ John records that the wine gave out (2:3), something that would have made the groom liable to a lawsuit and brought perpetual shame and disgrace to the family. Mary, who may have had some responsibility for organization of the catering, leans hard on her firstborn son to address the issue.

Jesus' response, "*Woman, what am I to you?*" (2:4), is as enigmatic as it is surprising. Carson notes that it is a common Semitic idiom that "always distances two parties, the speaker's tone overlaid with some degree of reproach. The tone is not rude; it is certainly abrupt."¹¹ The sense here would be "You have no claims on me" or "Why do you involve me?" Right at the beginning of his ministry Jesus emphatically declares that he is free from any human agenda or emotional control, including his mother's. He will indeed do a miracle, but he makes it quite clear that it is not because his mother asked.

The boundary lines are drawn even further when Jesus' popularity literally goes through the roof in Capernaum. Peter's home became inundated with so many people with such pressing needs that Jesus and his team of disciples couldn't even take time to eat. From Jesus' family's perspective, however, things were getting out of hand, and they came to Capernaum to seize him, believing that Jesus was out of his mind (Mark 3:20-21). The tension mounts when they arrive and "send" for him to come outside. This act of sending and calling is indicative that they wish for Mary's son and their brother to return to his 'rightful' place within the old family structure. Will he condescend to family pressure?

And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35)

There comes a time in every son or daughter's life, when the Lord asserts his lordship upon them and it may not be to the parents' liking. And in extreme cases it may appear as if following Jesus, looks like abandonment. Although that is not the case, in the heat of the moment that is how it may appear. We cannot follow Jesus and live to please our parents. As Jesus affirms,

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

As a child and adolescent I lived my life to please my dad. I wanted nothing more than his blessing. My father was devastated when I went to Stanford to study economics and upon graduation voiced my desire to intern at PBC. In one of our rare conversations, he sat me down and said, "I want you to go to Harvard or Stanford Business School, and then if you want to go off and be like Billy Graham, it's OK; but first get your Masters Degree." His advice was logical and wise, but I couldn't see taking more of his money and then pursuing my spiritual education. So I decided to intern. My mother told me that once I made that decision my father didn't sleep for months, and it caused me deep grief to cause him such grief. But God had to arrange these circumstances for me because I am a man-pleaser and God had to teach me to follow him and take the consequences, even disappointing my earthly father. It was never easy to go home after that. Once when I did, I met my dad on the golf course and I heard the other golfers in the foursome whispering to each other, "Don't ask the doctor what his son is doing, you'll only embarrass him." That was the choice I had to make to follow Christ.

IV. Stage 4: Reconnecting as Adult Friends

Boundaries are important to build and maintain, but over time the transforming power of the gospel can lead to a greater freedom for children to reconnect with their parents as adult friends. Over time my parents began to see that PBC was not a cult and they began to respect what I did, especially with my reports of our wild escapades and international travels with Ray Stedman.

Then one day the call came: my dad's carotid artery was severely blocked and he was on the verge of a fatal stroke. Unless surgery was performed soon he would not survive. But at eighty-two, he had difficulty finding a surgeon to take on the risk of surgery. I had no medical expertise, but I did have Christian friends who were more than willing to help my father. So I invited my father to fly to our home for treatment. Upon his arrival he received 'first class' treatment from surgeons, nurses and our friends. The surgery was

a success and the surgeons didn't even send him a bill. This lavish gesture of generosity was a first time experience for him.

After this near encounter with death, I watched his heart soften. He was set to recuperate in our home following his surgery, but I had to be away the coming weekend for the PBCC annual Men's retreat and Emily insisted I either take him with me or send him home. To my amazement he said he wanted to join me at the conference, and there I watched in amazement as he made new friends, sang Christian hymns, laughed in fellowship and dialogued with our retreat speaker, the gifted evangelist Michael Green. In the final moments of the conference, Michael Green took the bold initiative and in a private encounter, led my dad to Christ. I'll never forget that moment. I walked into his room. He held out his hand to me, and with tears in his eyes said, "I just accepted the Lord." This was the first time I ever saw my father's tears.

On the way home, Michael Green put his arms around the two of us and said, "You two will have to get re-acquainted now, won't you?" Michael was right. From that moment I felt we were able to reconnect as adult friends with intimate conversations we had never experienced before.

V. Stage 5: Honoring Parents by Being the Parent

The final stage of the parent-child relationship takes place when our parents need us the most. It is then that we honor them by giving them the same love and nurture they gave us when we were newborns – we feed them, we bathe them, we lift them, we hold them, we stroke their hair, we lay them in bed at night and read them prayers from the psalms, we sing to them, we cry with them. I'm struck by the fact that Jesus did not neglect this honorable responsibility even while he was suffering on the cross.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:26-27)

Emily did this for almost every member of her family. With my parents, my sister faithfully shouldered the brunt of this work with both my parents. In August 2001 she called and said that dad was dying and almost in a coma. I went to see him in the hospital. After everyone left the room I was alone with my father. He woke from his coma and stared straight into my eyes. We were so close gazing into each other's eyes, but I could not refrain from turning away. Later I wondered, was it fear – fear of finally feeling the affection of a father? Or fear of seeing him seized by fear, of that dreaded demon, death? Or was it sadness of the years we had missed, father and son? I was afraid to look into his eyes this one last time. Going home, I felt like I had missed a key opportunity. Dad survived a few more months and God gave me a second chance to connect with him. Just before Christmas I went back to the hospital. I entered the room and noticed the TV was tuned to a football game. Memories of my youth came flooding back, I grabbed his hand and together we watched the game.

Watching Football

Today I went to see my father
and to gaze into his eyes.
Was he dying of pneumonia?
I know he was terrified and tortured in pain,
yet above his head a TV was fixed on football.
I took his hand
and he squeezed mine,
and for a moment
he was no longer my father
but a frail human being
in need of comfort, compassion
and a tender touch of hope.
I took his hand and he took mine
and we watched football –
that's what fathers and sons do.
Once when I was a little boy, during halftime
he made me a pair of frail goal posts out of wood
so I could pretend and play
on my own football field in my backyard,
then he threw the ball to me until the game resumed.
Now I was holding his hand at halftime
and in one minute the game would resume,
and perhaps with it, eternity.
Before I left I looked deep into his hazel eyes,
eyes never age,
"I love you, dad."
Summoning all his strength and vacant beating breath
he said, "I love you, too."
Today we watched football –
that's what fathers and sons do.

Today, I'm incredibly grateful to God for the gift of my father,
Dr. Wendell Andrew Morgan (April 9, 1909 – December 24, 2001).

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Sermon and the Lunch," in *Undeceptions: Essay on Theology and Ethics*, ed. W. Hooper (Bles, 1971), 237. Quoted in N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 146.

2. I am indebted to Beale's work for these insights. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology, The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 836-42.

3. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 842.

4. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 147.

5. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 842.

6. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 148.

7. "ἡπακουῶ" BAGD 1028.

8. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 149.

9. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 269.

10. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 169.

11. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 170.