

Feast of the Holy Family
December 30, 2007

2nd Reading Colossians 3:12-:21

Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

When it comes to our second reading today there were two options when it came to what version to use. One is a shorter version which would have let me put this reading off to the side this week. The longer version contains the command that wives be subordinate to their husbands (Colossians 3:18). Which means that everyone who was awake during that reading is now curious and or upset, and which also means that now I have to talk about this.

So we've got to try to figure this out. First let's discuss one option that is not available to us. We can't just ignore this part of the bible. If we start to ignore those parts of the bible which are hard to understand then we end up with a religion of our own making, which is not something God has a particularly high opinion of.

So, if someone decides to take the command that wives be subordinate to their husbands and just ignore it, or pretend it's not there, or decide that we can just dismiss it out of hand because it was written 2,000 years ago that would start a very dangerous precedent.

If we're free to dismiss any part of the bible, than we're free to dismiss *any* part of the bible. So someone could decide they like all the commandments, except for that whole don't commit adultery part. Or someone might decide they're really into what Jesus had to say, except for that whole love your neighbor thing.

So we can't ignore what the bible has to say, we have to figure this passage out.

First I'm going to point out some immediately obvious limitations that are placed on this command and then I'm going to explain how I don't think it means what it seems to at first.

Some of the conclusions that I reach along the way to my final conclusion might not be viewed too favorably by some people, but that's because I'm going to make my argument step by step. You can get angry with me if you want, but please only do that after you've heard my final conclusion.

The first thing to note is that this passage says wives should be subordinate to their husbands. It doesn't say anything about all women being subordinate to all men. So even the strictest, most offensive interpretation of this passage places some definite limitations on the implications of this verse.

The next thing to do is to look is at the other place where St. Paul said the same thing. We just heard part of St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. This was a letter to the Christians in a city about 100 miles from the Mediterranean Sea in what is now Western Turkey. Another one of the letters St. Paul wrote was to the Ephesians, the Christians in a city called Ephesus located on the Mediterranean on what is now the coast of Turkey. In the 5th chapter of this letter St. Paul told wives to be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22).

But then he went on to say “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.” (Ephesians 5:25)

How did Christ love the church?

He died for it.

How did he die for it?

He was tortured and crucified.

So husbands are supposed to love their wives so much that they would be willing to be tortured to death for them.

We need to understand how breathtaking this is.

Right now I need to point out some pretty disturbing historical facts, but they’re absolutely necessary if we’re going to understand what the New Testament has to say about women.

During the time that the New Testament was written most of the pagan societies that Christianity was trying to overcome believed that women, including wives, were property. It was sometimes the case that husbands were allowed to kill their wives without penalty. Legally it would be same as if he decided to destroy any other piece of his property. It might be seen as a foolish waste of something of value, but not as a criminal offense.

So in that context for St. Paul to say that husbands need to be willing to die for their wives, means that St. Paul is giving women a value and a dignity that would have been shocking and unbelievable in the context of the Roman culture that he was a part of.

So did St. Paul just do this, give husbands an extremely demanding obligation to love their wives but leave in place the expectation of the day that wives would be subordinate to their husbands?

If he had, that would have been a tremendous example of cultural change for the better, but I think he did more than that.

To understand the full implications of what St. Paul taught us about wives, we need to understand what he taught us about slaves. This is an extremely unfortunate connection to have to make, but wives and slaves were two groups that got a lousy deal in the first century and whose situations Christianity in general, and St. Paul in particular, worked to change.

We need to look at a third letter of St. Paul's, his letter to Philemon. Philemon was a Christian, a friend of St. Paul's, and a slave owner. In all likelihood he was someone who had owned slaves previously, had converted to Christianity, but had not freed his slaves.

One of his slaves, a man named Onesimus, escaped. When Onesimus escaped he found St. Paul, became a friend of his, and became a Christian. St. Paul wrote his letter to Philemon because Onesimus, a convert to Christianity, was returning to his master Philemon, another convert to Christianity. In the letter St. Paul referred to Onesimus as his brother (Philemon 16), told Philemon to receive him as brother, and told Philemon to treat Onesimus in the same way in which he would treat Paul himself (Philemon 17).

Paul didn't say anything about freeing Onesimus, or changing his legal status as a slave. But, if Philemon was supposed to treat him as a brother, and as someone who was

in equal in status to St. Paul, then even if his legal status remained unchanged, clearly the way in which he was going to be treated and valued had fundamentally changed.

So we never see in St. Paul's writings an explicit statement that the social institution of slavery should be done away with, but the inevitable implication of living out what St. Paul had to say about the treatment of slaves was that the institution of slavery would have to be phased out.

And I believe it's the same way with the subordination of wives to their husbands. Yes men and women are different, a husband is different than a wife, a mother is different than a father, a son is different from a daughter, a sister is different than a brother. But differences between the genders don't have to imply superiority or subordination.

St. Paul never commanded the abandonment of the practice of wives being subordinated to their husbands. He never specifically condemned this social reality, just as he never specifically condemned the social reality of slavery.

But the implications of what St. Paul had to say about how husbands are to love their wives are far-reaching. St. Paul's instructions on how Onesimus was to be treated are the first steps in an argument that ends with the destruction of slavery. St. Paul never specifically gave that command, but I think that is the inevitable conclusion of what he did clearly teach.

I also believe that St. Paul's instructions on how husbands are to love their wives are the first steps in an argument that ends up rejecting the notion of wives subordination to their husbands. St. Paul never specifically gave that command, but I think that is the inevitable conclusion of what he did clearly teach.

This does leave us with one last question. Why didn't St. Paul specifically condemn slavery or the subordination of wives? We can't know for sure, but I think it's because of this; it would have been too big of a task for him to take on. St. Paul had a hard enough time instructing the first Christians in the basics of morality when it came to their personal lives and the life of the church. Trying to also teach the full implications of what this meant for society, and what sort of laws Christians should seek to enact would have just been too big of a task. If he had tried to accomplish everything at once he wouldn't have accomplished anything. He had to worry about getting the basics done right first.

So this is the shortest possible version of this argument that I can think can possibly be made, and it was still 10 or 11 minutes long. This is a very complex and controversial passage of scripture, but I hope that I've been able to give you some understanding of how it can properly be understood in a way that shows that many of our fears about this passage are unfounded.

I hope I have been able to give you some understanding of how the early church in general, and St. Paul in particular, did so much to change for the better the ways in which women were viewed, treated, and valued.