

Twelve Keys to Spiritual Maturity: A Godly Home

Colossians 3:18-21

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In approaching these keys to spiritual maturity, it is very easy to convey two mistaken impressions.

The first one is the belief that the Christian life is about achieving some sort of whiz-bang, MTV, instant attainment thing. Just apply the magic formula, the correct set of mantras and, "Hey Presto" a mature Christian.

It's a bit like America on Line. This week I have spoken to young men (at least they sounded young to me) called Jerry, Ben and, well some others that I can't quite recall. My AOL was giving me problems. Not ethical problems so much as software problems. I called AOL Help and this young voice says, "Hi Derek, I'm Ben." "What can I do for you?" "You can solve this problem" I said, (I describe it) and instantly (a little too instantly) he says, "I'm attaching a file to an e-mail I'm going to send you. Just click on this file and that should do the trick." Right!

It didn't! In fact, as I kept on insisting to someone called Jason, it made things worse! It had promised an instant cure, but it made things worse. Because as you all know, software problems are designed to be complicated. There's a Gnostic conspiracy that only people like Ben and Jason can really live their lives to the full.

Christian maturity is more than simply down-loading a file and double-clicking!

But there's a second mistake that we can make. It has to do with guilt! Yes, guilt! Because a series like this one can bat you up. And tonight we are going to touch on marriage and children and the home, and I don't think there's anyone here tonight who doesn't feel some measure of guilt about the way we handle this aspect of our lives. In this area, more than any other, I find myself saying, "Could I get a replay of that?" And although I want us to look at this tonight I feel it important to remind myself that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Having seen those two mistakes that we can make, Paul wants us to see that the way our relationship with Christ manifests itself is in the every-day issues of life. Colossians 3 is one of the most fundamental chapters in the whole Bible on the

issue of what it means to be a Christian. It would repay very careful study indeed. We looked at the opening verses in two sessions right at the very beginning of this series where Paul talks about what it means to have a spiritual mindset. And now, without pausing for breath, Paul turns to marriage and makes these seemingly simple (they are not, of course!) commands to husbands, wives and children. Because the way our spiritual maturity works itself out is in the context of the relationships that we forge. What you are in your prayer closet is one thing; but, what you are in your relationship with your spouse is where it is measured.

Throughout this whole section in Colossians, Paul has been saying that the Christian life can be lived in any and every circumstance if we grasp this fundamental point: in all of life's relationships *we are living primarily for our Lord Jesus Christ*. See no one in the picture but Jesus. If you grasp this principle, it really will transform your life in every relationship in which you are engaged. There is always a greater loyalty that you owe than the one you owe to your husband or wife, viz., your relationship to Jesus Christ. That's the most important thing of all. Look at what he says in the immediately preceding verses (vv.15,16 and 17). When he talks about their relationship to each other, he punctuates it with these little expressions:

in the Lord (v18),

well-pleasing to the Lord (v.20), or

with respect to slaves, fearing the Lord (v.22).

Then again in verse 22, "it is the Lord Christ that you serve."

You are to live, not primarily with your husband in view, or your wife in view, or your parents in view, but with Jesus in view. I do this for Jesus sake. And here in chapter 3, when he speaks about marriage, he speaks about living in such a way that has great worth or value in God's sight. That's the thing that will sweeten the relationship in every relationship: my relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. When we think of the relationships and responsibilities of marriage, if Jesus isn't at the head of it, if He isn't the one determining the perspectives, then everything is going to get out of whack. You will end up with husbands with the ethical finesse of Jabba the Hut, and wives with the scheming subtlety of Lady Macbeth.

You remember how George Herbert puts it in his beautiful little poem, *The Elixir*,

*All may of Thee partake
Nothing can be so mean
Which with his tincture, for thy sake
will not grow bright and clean.*

If you bow before Him, then in whatever sphere you find yourself in, an entirely

different atmosphere will pervade your life as you find yourself in circumstances which are less than ideal.

Now what I want to do is to look at what Paul has to say to wives in v 18, and then in the second place to husbands in verses 19 and 20, and then to fathers and children in v.21. And then I want to make a series of applications to a variety of situations from all of this.

There's a great deal of cynicism about marriage these days. Its not surprising whenever we see the statistics about divorce. One little girl had been to see Cinderella, and whenever she was being asked about it, the questioner said, "I know what happens in the end, Cinderella and the Prince live happily ever after." And the girl replied, "O no they didn't. They got married!"

Let's take a look at what Paul says.

I. His counsel to wives: what is it? Be submissive.

Now, according to a leading commentary on Colossians, of the over 40 occurrences of this word in the New Testament, they all carry "the overtone of authority and subjection." What Paul is saying here, as he makes clear elsewhere, is what is said at the very beginning of the Bible: that the central ministry of a wife is to be a "helper suitable" for her husband (Gen. 2:18).

Now Paul doesn't so say so here, but in Ephesians 5 (and remember that these two epistles, Ephesians and Colossians were circular ones which were read and re-read throughout the Lycus Valley where Colosse was situated, and that therefore these Colossian Christian would have been familiar with what Paul had written in Ephesians) he goes to draw the metaphor that submission to one's husband is illustrated in how the church submits herself to Christ.

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which He is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Eph. 5:22-24).

Think about it! The reason why the church submits herself to her Lord is not only because He is her head, but also because He is her Savior! He is the one who protects and keeps her. There is a pattern established that, to cite Peter, it is the "unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" in which a woman finds her true identity. It is the "fitting" thing to do. It is the divine pattern that God has established. A marriage is like a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces fit perfectly as they are intended to. Balk at this, and you are balking at the natural order of things, the creational order of things. God has made male and female to complement each other, rather than to be equal to each to each other. And it is

the principle of complementarity, rather than egalitarianism that Paul is concerned to show. There are roles to fulfil, and in the fulfilling of them we find ourselves mirroring something of the extraordinary mystery which is Christ's relationship to His bride, the church.

"The holier a woman is" wrote Leon Bloy, "the more she is a woman." What spiritual maturity displays in a woman is her femininity. What is that Jesus says? "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow. Because only as you lose yourself will you find yourself." Let me put that this way: only as you lose yourself in Jesus will you find yourself. *Let Me be a Woman*, is the title of one Elizabeth Elliot's books, isn't it. And being a woman means embracing femininity and celebrating it as made in heaven with a view to complementing masculinity, that apart from which it would for ever be less than complete. There is a void at the heart of masculinity that can only ever be adequately filled by a woman.

II. To husbands. He goes for the jugular of male-chauvinism: Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Paul, far from advancing the cause of male-chauvinism, is aware of the possible abuse: the marital finesse of the grand sultan of Morocco. So he makes a positive and negative command: love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

There is the positive: love your wives. Elsewhere Paul likens this to the way Jesus loves His church and gives Himself for her that He might present her as a spotless bride, and so. Self-sacrificing love.

And the negative: not to be harsh. The word may imply that the husband takes out the frustrations and bitterness he feels in other areas of life on his wife. Such a practice has to stop.

You cannot pretend that you know anything of spiritual maturity if, when you speak to your wife, you reduce her to tears. If you snap and growl and bear your teeth like some prize Rottweiler. I'm going to come back to this in a moment, but we (and I'm addressing to the men here) need to appreciate that the measure of our spiritual maturity is not what we pretend to be in front of others, but what we actually are in front of our wives.

Men! The pattern here is Jesus Christ! His love for the church! His willingness to give Himself to the point of death on her behalf. His willingness to deny Himself all of his rights for her.

Now we need to understand and we are fast losing it in this world of radical feminism. That what the gospel of Christ brought into the world, the honor and respect of wives, is fast being demolished in our society. How God intended

husbands to be as to a profound sense of thoughtfulness as to who they are and what they need.

I want to go to *1 Peter* to help us understand what this means. In *1 Peter* 3:7, Peter says:

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

How are we to love our wives? Treat them with respect, honor. What does a Christian man do with respect to his wife? He gives her honor. And then he explains a little more as to what that means: he says, you not only give her honor, but you must regard her as an heiress. Now you need to understand that this was a world in which women didn't inherit! You need to understand how shocking these injunctions were, how radically different the Bible thinks of women than the world around it did. He is saying they are heirs of the kingdom of God! And he is really saying that you have to apply within your marriage a principle that can be applied across the board: you are dealing with one of God's heirs. You honor them, because Jesus Christ has honored them, and as he says at the end of verse 7, so that you can live in communion with God.

Isn't that staggering: that you come before God in your prayers, and because you are not honoring your wife, God says, "I cannot have communion with you." Men, I don't know about you but I find to be very sobering indeed. Because you are going about sulking and not speaking to your spouse means that, well, "We will not talk either." "You go and put this right and then come back to me and we will put things right," God is saying.

III. There's a third admonition. It has to do with children.

"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Col. 3:20-21).

Now, time will not permit me to open this out in the way I would like, but I want us to see that there is an order within the family that we ignore at our peril. We are to rear our children in such a way that this order is preserved. What this is trying to preserve is the complementarity of the family unit. There is a role for the wife, there is a role for the husband and there is a role for the child. I know it says, "in everything" but, I think we are meant to understand that as "everything that is compatible with my primary loyalty to serve the Lord Jesus Christ."

But note the warning to the parents: "do not embitter your children, or they will be discouraged." Is Paul thinking of something that had happened to him in his own childhood? Perhaps. He is saying that parents can make unreasonable

demands, or show favoritism to one child over another, or fail to show love. Humiliating them, putting them down, failing to praise them, and the consequence? Angry young men and women. It means allowing children to be what God means them to be, to have their own personalities, their own talents, their own particular gift-mix. Parents, do your children disappoint you because they are not turning out the way you wanted them to be? I'm not talking about letting their sinfulness run rampant. I'm talking about recognizing that God has made them in a particular way and it may not be the way you would wanted. Are you going to go through life always wanting that child to be someone else? Don't be surprised if he or she becomes discouraged! I have a faithful friend here in the congregation who was brave enough to point out that I may well have been guilty of this very thing.

IV. Now let me try and sum up a few things:

Wives are called to be submissive

Husbands are called to take loving leadership

First of all to those of you who are married: let me ask you if this is a description of your marriage? As Paul does his "Focus on the Family" section in the letter, let me ask it again, is this a description of your marriage? Because it is the single most powerful evangelistic tool the church has today! Let me suggest that you find some quiet space and read over this passage and ask the Lord to show ways in which you may be practically obedient about your married life.

Second, it is saying that the mark of our devotion to Christ can be measured in our homes. How you behave in public is one thing, but how you are in your home is where it is measured. Let me ask you men how much you love your wives? Winston Churchill once attended a banquet in London in which he was asked (along with others), "If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?" Churchill was sitting next to his wife, Clemmie, and everyone was eager to hear what he would say. When it came to his turn, he rose and gave the answer, "If I could not be who I am, I would most like to be," — here he paused and took hold of his wife's hand, — "Lady Churchill's second husband."

Third, I want us to be aware of something that I think the devil is doing at the minute. If you wanted to destroy the very fabric of society, destabilize everything, bring about a quiet revolution, how would you go about that? Well, you would begin to systematically undo the sanctity of marriage and family. I have a little questionnaire that I give to prospective suitors of my daughter, and one of the questions reads: "Do you have one male parent and one female parent?" Its meant to be a little bit of humor on part. Except, it isn't! Because it's all too easy for the answer to that question to be "No!" My point is, that the place the devil gains ground is inside the front door of our homes. You know it and I know it! And

we need to resolve to drive him out. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" Joshua said.

Are we saying that, too?

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