

The Household Regulations: Did Paul's Critique of His World Go Far Enough?

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Introduction:

A text that spoke both out of and into its world effectively; a text that has been weaponized against wives, children, slaves, and especially New World slaves.

1. What did his world think?

Principle: If you want to understand a person/statement, attempt to understand the context.

What are their most important terms?

1.1. The classic Greek: Aristotle (clipped lines is all we have space for), *Politics* 1253b (1.2.1-2)

New World politicians and slaveowners appealed to Aristotle.

- 1.1.1. **Households:** “And now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households. Household management falls into departments corresponding to the parts of which the household in its turn is composed; and the household in its perfect form consists of slaves and freemen. The investigation of everything should begin with its smallest parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships, I mean that of mastership, that of marriage there is no exact term denoting the relation uniting

wife and husband, and thirdly the progenitive relationship this too has not been designated by a special name.”

- 1.1.2. **Master-Slave:** “Let us begin by discussing the relation of master and slave” (1.2.2).

“Since therefore property is a part of a household and the art of acquiring property a part of household management (for without the necessaries even life, as well as the good life, is impossible), and since, just as for the particular arts it would be necessary for the proper tools to be forthcoming if their work is to be accomplished, so also the manager of a household must have his tools, and of tools some are lifeless and others living (for example, for a helmsman the rudder is a lifeless tool and the lookout man a live tool—for an assistant in the arts belongs to the class of tools), so also an article of property is a tool for the purpose of life, and property generally is a collection of tools, and a slave is a live article of property” (1.2.3-4).

- 1.1.3. **Husband-Wife:** “And since, as we saw, the science of household management has three divisions, one the relation of master to slave, of which we have spoken before, one the paternal relation, and the third the conjugal—for it is a part of the household science to rule over wife and children (over both as over freemen, yet not with the same mode of government, but over the wife to exercise republican government and over the children monarchical); for the male is by nature better fitted to command than the female (except in some cases where their union has been formed contrary to nature)... . (1.5.1-2).
- 1.1.4. **Father-Child:** “The rule of the father over the children on the other hand is that of a king; for the male parent is the ruler in virtue both of affection and of seniority, which is characteristic of royal government” (1.5.2).
- 1.1.5. **Summary:** “It is clear then that household management takes more interest in the human members of the household than in its inanimate property, and in the excellence of these than in that of its property, which we style riches, and more in that of its free members than in that of slaves” (1.5.3).

- 1.2. A 1st Century Jew: Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.199-208; trans. JGM Barclay)

“What are the [statements] concerning marriage [in the Law of Moses]?”
(199)

Here Josephus interprets Law for gentile readers.

- 1.2.1. **Marital conjugal relations:** restricted to heterosexual relations and for the purpose of procreation (199; cf. *Antiquities* 4.261). Death penalty for same-sex relations (199). Marry not for dowry, not by “violent seizure” [=rape; Deut 22:28-29], not “seducing through guile or deceit” ... all “in accordance with suitable kinship” (200). Conjugal relations were to be followed by ablutions (203).
- 1.2.2. **Husband-wife:** “A woman is inferior to a man in all respects” ... so “let her obey, not that she may be abused, but that she may be ruled”... “for God has given power to the man” (201). Death penalty for infidelity (201).
- 1.2.3. **Birth and Nurture:** The Law “gave orders to nurture all children” [not abandon them] “and prohibited women from causing the seed to miscarry and from destroying it” [contraception, abortion] (202). Teach children how to read, the Law, Israel’s history.

2.0 What did Paul think in his world?

How does Paul “Christianize” the household?

What strikes you as similar and dissimilar?

- 2.1 Notice the similar appeal to the household as the central location for teaching relations.
- 2.2 Notice the order of the Pauline regulations: the subordinate before the superordinate (wives then husbands, children then fathers, slaves then master). Notice the emphasis on slaves.
- 2.3 Notice the simultaneous recognition of power in the superordinate and the warning about that power.

- 2.4 Notice the Christian motivation for the subordinate's behavior. (*italics*)
- 2.5 Notice a radical move by Paul: the NIV's "right and fair" in 4:1 translates *to dikaion kai tēn isotēta*, which could be translated more accurately with "right and equality/equity" and the clear example of what Paul means here is Philemon, where the critical expression is "no longer as a slave but as a sibling [in Christ]."
- Col. 3:18** Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, *as is fitting in the Lord.*
- Col. 3:19** Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.
- Col. 3:20** Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord.*
- Col. 3:21** Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.
- Col. 3:22** Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart *and reverence for the Lord.* ²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, *as working for the Lord, not for human masters,* ²⁴ *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* ²⁵ Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.
- Col. 4:1** Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, *because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.*

Has Paul gone far enough?