



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Follow the Redemptive Arc

Bible Reading: Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 6:1-9

[Watch LIVESTREAM here at 10am](#)

[Join our post-sermon discussion on Zoom at 11am](#)

[Join our citKids Connect discussion at 11am](#)

SUMMARY: The NT ‘Household Codes’ (Eph. 5, 6; Col. 3) mandate the roles of wives/husbands, children/parents, & slaves/masters. They enshrine in Scripture modified versions of Roman-Greek ethical codes. In our era they have generated heated debate & bitter controversy; 150-years ago they were used to justify US slavery. Are they timeless divinely-ordained principles or historic protocols irrelevant today? Do they reflect ‘universal norms’ or an ‘interim ethic’ which tolerated 1st-century patriarchy and slavery? How can we treat them as “God’s Word,” and apply them today in our cultural context? What can we learn from Paul’s interaction with slavery on both personal & institutional levels?

I. ‘Household Codes’ (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-25; 4:1)

A. NT ‘Household Codes’ Adopt & Adapt Existing Greek Ethical Codes

- “NT ‘household codes’ *didn’t just adopt* existing moral traditions...; *they adapted it*. They *transformed* that tradition...The early churches...envisioned a different world...[where] *‘there’s no...slave or free, male & female;...all are one in Christ’* (Gal. 3:28). They struggled to bring...[about what] they envisioned.” –Allen Verhay, J. Harvard

B. Accommodating secular roles/institutions to avoid appearing subversive (Rom. 13:1)

1. Accepting what can’t be changed
2. To avoid appearing subversive

C. Not timeless absolutes, but modified 1st-century secular codes

- “The church adopted the commonplace rules, but *they also adapted them...they nudged them in the direction of God’s good future...The church should not absolutize the [codes]* as a timeless moral code, but rather attend to *the direction in which it nudged the received tradition.*” –Allen Verhay, Joseph Harvard
- “We’ve sometimes read the [‘codes’] as...timeless moral rules dropped out of heaven to be forever the rules to guide our lives. As a result [they’ve] been used to defend patriarchy, slavery, & abuse.” –Allen Verhay, J. Harvard

D. Household codes: an “universal norm,” or an “interim ethic”?

- **Universal norm:** “*Whenever these relationships exist, the people...are expected to act as Paul commanded...When servants are servants [slaves are slaves] (& masters...masters), these guidelines pertain ...[For] children...& parents...these guidelines remain...When a woman is a wife (& a man is a husband) this is the order God expects.*” — Richard R. Melick Jr. (2001)
 - **Interim Ethic:** “The New Testament...express[es] the *unfolding of an ethic*...in an incremental (not absolute) fashion.. The issue is not the NT’s status as final revelation, but...its realization of ethics.” —William Webb
- E. Short of God’s ultimate ideal, his ‘perfect ethic’ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13)
- “*In Christ there’s no Greek & Jew...barbarian, Scythian, slave & free; but Christ is all & in all.*” (Col. 3:11)
 - “Col. 3:11 summarizes [Paul’s end-time] vision...*Yet this completion lies in the indeterminate future*...In the meantime, the *church is to strive to approximate...this future.*” —Bruce Hansen
 - “The household codes...left the church at some distance from the future it envisioned...The *church continues its pilgrimage* towards [God’s] good future.” —Allen Verhay, Joseph Harvard
 - “In Gal. 3:28 we observe Paul’s ‘*perfect-ethic*’—...the way he ultimately wishes for churches & Christian households to operate. Col 3:18-4:1 isn’t a contradiction...but...a ‘*contextual-ethic*’...[for] a particular time & place.”—N. Gupta

F. Incremental Steps towards God’s Ultimate Ethic:

- “God...accommodates himself to...people...in their existing social ethic & from there *he gently moves them with incremental steps towards something better.*” —William Webb

II. Slaves & Masters in the Household Codes (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1)

A. Adopting & Adapting existing Codes (Eph. 6:5, 8-9)

B. Equal Status regarding Judgment (Eph. 6:9; cf. Rom. 10:11-13; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13)

- “When masters are told to stop threatening their slaves because ‘their Master & yours is in heaven, & there’s no favoritism with him,’...[this] unsettles the conventional patterns of master-slave relations.”—Richard Hays
- Masters/slaves equal: in salvation (Rom. 10:11-13); ‘in Christ’ (Col. 3:11) & Body (1 Cor. 12:13); judgment (Eph. 6:9)

C. Restructuring Relationships; ‘Seeds’ for Abolition?

- “If slaves shared in the same grace...as their masters, then the honor...would...be given in *both directions*, establishing a reciprocity that would *eventually upend the hierarchies*...” —John Barclay

III. The Redemptive Arc (‘Trajectory’)

A. ‘Redemptive Movement’ (Arc) Explained:

1. Progressive revelation & incremental realization in social ethics

B. What’s Counter-cultural? Is there a Canonical Trend?

1. Counter-cultural Contrast

2. What’s the Trajectory, the ‘Redemptive Arc’?

3. William Webb’s XYZ Formula

4. Defining the “Ultimate Ethic”—point “Z”—“God’s good future” (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11, 1 Cor. 12:13)

– Critics allege “*the lack of a clear end to any trajectory* [the ‘ultimate ethic’] *is extremely problematic.*”—Jeff Fisher

– But, the ‘ultimate/perfect ethic’ is defined by Paul’s vision of ‘God’s good future’: Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11, 1 Cor. 12:13, etc.

IV. Redemptive Movement Model applied to Slavery:

A. Codes condone Slavery (Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:22; Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18)

- In “the biblical texts on slaves [there’s] a *less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves...[in] a major part of our Bible... there’s a problem* with the treatment of slaves in the Bible.”—William Webb

B. Slavery at odds with God as the Emancipator of Israel (Ex. 13:14; Lev. 26:13)

- “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of...Egypt, out of the place of slavery.*” (Ex. 13:14; 12x in OT)

C. Exodus’ clear message trumps the NT Household Codes

- The Household codes don’t prescribe slavery; they’re presented in the context of slavery.
- “A guideline [is] not in the...NT, but...*Exodus...provides the clearer word*...The Bible’s *apparent* authorization of slavery [is] overcome [by]...a sharp distinction between Biblical *description* & Biblical [*prescription*].” —Jack Davison

D. Yet, in the OT Israel still practiced slavery—why?

E. Israel treated Slaves better than most nations

- “There’s redemptive movement...within the biblical text...sufficient...to signal...the possibility of further improvements for later generations,” leading to Christian-backed campaigns for emancipation (e.g. W. Wilberforce)—William Webb
- F. Scripture’s ‘Redemptive Arc’ points towards Emancipation of Slaves
- G. Divergent Trajectories—Slavery vs. Homosexuality
- H. “When [biblical] texts prohibiting homosexual behavior are read against that backdrop of the ancient world... [there’s] movement in *a more restrictive direction...*” —William Webb
- I. Household codes: How to live the Christian life as a slave?
- J. The “Ultimate Ethic” implies Slavery’s Abolition (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; etc.)

V. Paul’s Personal Interaction with Slavery—His Letter to Philemon re: his slave Onesimus

- A. Paul’s Pastoral Advice (1 Cor. 7:20-21)
- B. Paul’s Advocacy for Philemon’s slave, Onesimus (meaning ‘Useful’) (Phlm. 1:10-22)
 - *Paul’s 3-fold request to Philemon...*[1.] First, accept Onesimus back...as a humble but reconciled brother in Christ (though still a slave): don’t punish him. [2.] Second, please send him back to me as an assistant. [3.] Third, perhaps...you’ll give him his freedom [implied in:] ‘*knowing...you’ll do even more than I say*’.—N. T. Wright
- C. Why Didn’t Paul Campaign for Emancipation & Slavery’s Abolition? [**Hint:** Paul is a prisoner (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Phlm. 9)]
- D. Other Scriptures condemn the Slave-trade (Rev. 18:11-13)

QUESTIONS: Read Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 6:1-9

1. Which directives do you think probably *match the prevailing values/roles* of 1st-century Greek-Roman society?
2. Which statements (directives) do you think were probably *strikingly counter-cultural* in the 1st century?
3. Some scholars emphasize the adaptations—differences between NT codes & their secular equivalent—to discern the *direction of change God desires* for Christian communities. Do you agree with this view? Why/why not?
4. Some “Bible literalists” assert that the whole of the Household Codes are God’s Word—every single phrase is God-ordained—for all time & for all Christians. So, we ought to practice every word today. How would you respond?
 - Consider the directives to slaves & masters
5. How might implementing the Household Codes have improved the slaves’ condition in Christian households?
6. Critics assert that Paul (& the NT) condoned (endorsed) the institution of slavery. Do you agree? Why/why not?
7. Why didn’t Paul *explicitly & publicly* call for slavery’s abolition & slaves’ emancipation in his churches?
8. When Paul personally faced the issue of slavery (individual slaves) how did he respond (e.g. *Philemon*)?
 - a. What might this indicate about Paul’s personal attitude towards slavery?
 - b. What might Paul’s “public policy stance,” diverge from his “personal pastoral counsel”? Discuss.
9. Others assert that Paul introduced elements that eventually undermined slavery & led to its abolition. Do you agree?
10. 150-years ago in the US, some argued that Paul never called for slavery’s abolition, & the ‘household codes’ endorse it—therefore (based on the Bible) slavery *ought to be tolerated, not abolished!*
 - a. How would you respond to this assertion?
 - b. Does the Bible provide any other perspectives on this issue? If so, what?

