**The Letter to the Colossians**

**The Gospel in Heathen & Multi-Religious Society - #11, 12**

**Subjection or Submission: its Origin and its Misuse**

**Colossians 3:18-25**

**Colossians 3:18 – Submission in Family Life**

*Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as is fitting, in the Lord.*

**Notes and studies**

1. The Greek verb for “submit” used in the NT is **ὑποτάσσεσθε**  (hypotassesthe) and means “to place under.” This verb was used in Luke and in Paul and in James 4:7.
2. The active verb was used in Romans 8:20: *“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope*”. In other words, creation was given to vanity
3. In 1 Corinthians 15:28, “*When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”* Here God is not among the things that were subjected to Christ. We must see this clearly in the light of Psalm 8:5, re: the first Adam. But now it is the second Adam Jesus who is the Mediator between God and creation. So God subjected everything to him.
4. The flesh resists God and *“does not submit”* (Rom 8:7), so also a Jew, by clinging and by adhering to the Law or the Torah, is resisting salvation in Christ (Rom 10:3)
5. Jesus subjected his life and became subordinate to his parents, (Luke 2:51), for Jesus obeys what is proper in social and religious life.

**What is the meaning of the submission of the wife?**

1. The above examples of the use of the verb “submit do not show us any dominance. It shows us harmony and order.
2. This is true in the similar texts (Col 3:18, Eph 5:22-24, 1 Pet 3:1, Titus 2:5).
3. In Colossians 3:18ff, the context of the whole paragraph is seeking harmony.

a. “*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*” It is fitting not for the Lord but in the Lord who taught us to love one another as he loves us.

b. *“Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.”*

c. In vv 12-17 there is a whole recommendations and pastoral directions of how family and community should live: Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. More *important “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”*  Then comes, “*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*”

4. This is how we are to read the teaching and not misread it in the light of the social even political models than may invade our communities.

**Letter from Philemon**

**Pride, Submission, Service**

Brother George,

May the Lord Jesus who emptied himself and took a form of a slave help you to grow up in his humility and in his self-giving love.

Nothing is more damaging to our inner life than pride. It is a hidden sickness that very often we notice only after it bites us with deadly passion.

Submission has many forms:

a. The submission of the less to the great like a slave to a master.

b. There is a submission of the equals in the body of the Christ the church, where love is the foundation of the relationship.

But in the Incarnation the Almighty and the Great our Lord submitted his life to us and lived among us as a servant, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*” ([Mark 10:45](http://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Mark/10/45)) And I have been praying and asking the Lord to reveal the meaning of these words, “*And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.’” But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.* ([Luke 22:24-30](http://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Luke/22/24)) Jesus my beloved told me that to serve is the only medicine that can heal our pride.

Service is a manifestation of true love. Now the One who humbled himself and submitted himself to us measures our understanding of submission. His self-denial is so puncturing that every time I hear, “*take and eat, this is my body*” I melt and cease to be. The Lord told me, “Philemon the higher serves the lower, for this is the true way of free love, when the higher our Lord became a slave to lift us to the status of adoption.”

Into the hands of our lover Jesus, I submit my life and your life so that

- all sense of power be that of love,

- all understanding of being great be that as God’s child,

- all knowledge that is acquired be for love.

Pray from me

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**Colossians 3:19:21 – The core of family life**

**3:19** *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*

He required submission of wives and love of husbands, urging them to behave gently with them as with their own body.

**3:20** *Children, obey your parents in everything: this is pleasing to the Lord.*

“Obedience of love can heal but obedience to power can generate rebellion” (Chrysostom)

**3:21** *Fathers, do not provoke your children lest they be come disheartened.*

“Distressing our children can create criminals” (Chrysostom)

**Colossians 3:22-25 – Slaves in Christian families**

**3:22** *Slaves, obey your masters in the flesh in everything.*

If the mind is free from fear, life can be pleasant. Paul advised the slaves not to give eye service to please human beings, but with simplicity of heart out of fear of God: pay heed to your masters with due regard, free of all malice so Paul added

**3:23** *…as to the Lord, not to human beings*.

**3:24** *…a reward is laid up for you in this.*

The sequel indicates this: “Aware that from the Lord you will receive the reward of your inheritance, you serve Christ the Lord.” (Theodoret on the letter to Colossians).

**3:25** *The unjust man will be repaid with his injustice, and there is no respecting of persons.*

**Did the NT allow slavery?**

Slavery was a common part of life in the Roman Empire even before the time of the NT. Many have asked why the early church didn't universally denounce slavery. Slaves were common to the OT, as humans were sold to pay debt bondage, and even apprenticeships and internships. Some slaves were kidnapped, and other slaves owned slaves of their own. Some worked at hard labor their whole lives while others became business partners with their owners. These individual situations call for individual judgments.

**The Roman Law for Slaves**

Slavery in the Roman Empire was not based on ethnicity or color, although ethnicity did play a role in determining what a slave might do. Greeks and Egyptians tended to be better educated while Europeans were valued more for strength and stamina. Most valued were Greeks, who were already educated in medicine or teaching, or any slave who could cook.

Most slaves were foreigners defeated in the Roman wars and were taken captive to the market in Rome. Enslaving them was an alternative to killing them outright or letting them go free to cause problems later.

A child born to slaves was automatically a slave. But if the parents were freed slaves, their children had all the rights of a Roman citizen. In the second century AD, an otherwise unknown jurist called Gaius wrote a textbook of Roman law for students. He sets out clearly the different legal statuses of slaves, citizens and different categories of freedmen, and mentions the various pieces of legislation which affected slaves, particularly the “Lex Aelia Sentia” of 4 AD.

Here are some basic laws:

1. The principal distinction made by the law of persons is this, that all human beings are either free men or slaves.
2. Next, some free men are freeborn, others freedmen.
3. The freeborn are those who were free when they were born; freedmen are those who have been released from a state of slavery.
4. Freedmen belong to one of three status groups:
   1. they are either Roman citizens,
   2. or so-called Latinas that is not yet citizens,
   3. or subjects.

Let us examine each status group separately, starting with subjects.

The “Codex Lex Aelia Sentia” requires that any slaves who had been put in chains as a punishment by their masters or had been branded or interrogated under torture about some crime of which they were found to be guilty; and any who had been handed over to fight as gladiators or with wild beasts, or had belonged to a troupe of gladiators or had been imprisoned; should, if the same owner or any subsequent owner manumits them, become free men of the same status as subject foreigners.

“Subject foreigners” is the name given to those who had once fought a regular war against the Roman People, were defeated, and gave themselves up.

We will never accept that slaves who have suffered a disgrace of this kind can become either Roman citizens or Latinas (whatever the procedure of manumission and whatever their age at the time, even if they were in their masters' full ownership); we consider that they should always be held to have the status of subjects.

**Citizens**

But if a slave has suffered no such disgrace, he sometimes becomes a Roman citizen when he is manumitted (freed from slavery). A slave becomes a Roman citizen if he fulfills the following three conditions. He must be over thirty years of age; his master must rightly own him; and he must be set free by legitimate manumission.

**Slave Punishment - Runaway Slaves**

A runaway slave could not legally be the object of sale. A class of persons called Fugitive made it their business to recover runaway slaves. The rights of the master over the slave were in no way affected by his running away. Runaway slaves were branded on the forehead with letters denoting the slave as a runaway (FUG), which was an abbreviation of "fugitives," meaning "runaway."

**Slave Punishment - Branding or Tattoos**

The slave punishment for theft was to be branded on the forehead with the letters "FUR", from the Latin word for thief. Tattooing was sometimes used instead of branding as a means of permanently marking a slave with the sign of his crime.  New slave recruits to gladiator schools had Roman tattoos (stigma, from where the English word stigmatized derives) applied as an identifying mark on the face, legs and hands.

**Slave Punishment - The Lash**

Slaves cost money to buy so many of the punishments did not inflict lasting damage. The lash was the most common punishment. When slaves were lashed with a whip they were suspended with a weight tied to their feet, that they might not move them or thrash about.

**Types of slaves**

Slavery in New Testament times could involve anything from manual labor under harsh conditions to a nine-to-five job with little oversight. Many slaves were abused, but others were treated almost like family.

*Mining:* The Roman Empire needed resources and used slaves to obtain them. The lowest rural slave was probably kidnapped or taken in war and had very little education. Conditions were horrible. Release was not an option. The slave was owned as chattel by the state with no personal interaction with his master and no way to gain favor. Many died of illness or lack of nutrition.

*Agriculture:* Conditions for slaves working in agriculture depended on the wealth of their owners. A wealthy owner might own hundreds or thousands of agriculture slaves. The slaves lived in communal houses, led by a higher-ranking slave or freeman, and were often branded for identification. Their job was to work the fields, and, although their conditions were better than those for a mining slave, agriculture slaves were still chattel with little chance for release.

An agriculture slave owned by a middle-class family was generally better off. He had more chances to earn a little money on the side and, if not released, could hope to attain a status similar to sharecropper, in which he worked the owner's land and paid a portion of the harvest to the owner. Some of these slaves would have been purchased from a slave trader, but others would have sold themselves for material support or to pay off a debt.

*Prostitutes and Gladiators:* Women in the sex trade and men chosen to fight to the death lived in the worst urban conditions. Their lives were short and brutal. They were owned as chattel and, like miners, were often kidnapped by slave traders or through war. Chance for release was negligible.

*Tradesmen:* The Roman upper class was too good for actual work, but they still needed shoes, weapons, furniture, and the like. Many tradesmen were technically slaves, and many more were freemen who had been released from slavery but continued on in their former owners' shops. Tradesmen often had a great deal of autonomy, as their owners had better things to do than monitor all their investments, and records from Pompeii show that even women held management positions. There was a good chance a tradesman would be released and, as mentioned, continue to work as a freeman with pay. Many down-and-out Romans sold themselves into slavery for the purpose of receiving room and board while learning a trade.

*Domestics:* The vast majority of urban slaves were domestics who lived in their master's house and had regular interaction with the family. Domestic slaves were needed to cook, clean, sew, garden, care for the horses, carry litters, teach the children, and even provide musical entertainment for guests. Treatment varied depending on the personality of the owner; some slaves were undoubtedly abused, while others were released and married into the family. The rich Romans had no more time for paperwork than they did for carpentry. Many enterprising young men sold themselves to important families for the purpose of learning accounting, medicine, or politics. These slaves could generally trust to be freed after a time and allowed to continue their career. A freed slave could hold almost any position besides elected office, and their freeborn children could rise as high as their ambition could take them. Their position in society was a strange one; the established families looked down on them as nouveau riche, but also lauded them to their own slaves as an example of the rewards to be had if they worked hard.

**What does the Bible say about slavery in the NT?**

In fact, in the OT, slavery was regulated as a type of welfare. The New Testament speaks more about exhibiting Christian character within the context of slavery and treating slaves as brothers. Slaves are not supposed to stay in the master's house forever ([John 8:35](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%208.35)). Slavery is not ideal, and "*if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity*" ([1 Corinthians 7:21-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%207.21-24)). Being a slave has no bearing on salvation or the spiritual state of a person before God ([1 Corinthians 12:13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%2012.13); [Galatians 3:28](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gal%203.28)). Slaves are to respect the world's system of authority while knowing that God is the only true authority ([Ephesians 6:5-8](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%206.5-8); [Colossians 3:22-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Col%203.22-24)). Masters are also to keep in mind that their position in Christ is no different from that of their slaves; they themselves are slaves to God ([Ephesians 6:9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Eph%206.9)).

Christian slaves are authorized to act on conscience if their master commands them to do something wrong, but they need to humbly accept the punishment for their justified rebellion, just as Jesus did ([1 Peter 2:19-20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Pet%202.19-20)).

Indirectly, the NT has even more to say about slavery:

a. Kidnapping is a serious offense ([1 Timothy 1:8-10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Tim%201.8-10)).

b.. Giving to the poor (which would prevent debt-bondage) is promoted ([Matthew 6:2-3](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%206.2-3); [19:21](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%2019.21); [26:11](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matthew%2026.11); [Luke 14:13](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2014.13)).

c. The church is responsible for giving to the poor ([Romans 15:26](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%2015.26); [Galatians 2:10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gal%202.10)).

d. Widows and orphans are to be supported, not owned ([James 1:27](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/James%201.27))

**Slavery was used in a positive metaphor in the NT**

Several places in the NT refers to slavery as a metaphor for a more honorable position.

- Prophets ([Matthew 21:33-41](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2021.33-41))

- Believers awaiting the Lord's return ([Matthew 24:45-51](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2024.45-51))

- Ministry workers ([Matthew 25:14-30](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2025.14-30))

- Evangelists ([Luke 14:16-24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2014.16-24))

- Obedient Christ-followers ([Luke 17:7-10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2017.7-10))

**Why didn't Paul push Philemon to free Onesimus?**

There are a couple of reasons why Paul may not have tried to help Onesimus escape from his master Philemon. First was what we have noted above in the Roman Law about a runaway slave, and could in some cases if being unlucky to have more than twenty years in labor in the mines or crucifixion. In restoring the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon, Paul planted the seeds of freedom: he emphasizes love (verse 9); he calls Onesimus "my son" (verse 10) and "my very heart" (verse 12); he points out that Onesimus is "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (verse 16; and he tells Philemon to "receive him as you would receive Paul " (verse 17).

Everything that Paul writes to Philemon counteracts the cultural and the legal acceptance of slavery. Mutual submission through the love of Christ is far more important than social freedom. The demonstration of brotherly love between slave and master was one way to show the darkness of such attitude to others.

***Pope’s Notes***

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