

SHAN:

[Please view the sermon video to see Shan's introduction and hear the story about Shan's 1993 visit to Lise in London, where she spent a semester while they were dating. Shan is a Winnie the Pooh Fan, and while he was in London, he and Lise visited the Victoria and Albert Museum, which had a display of original E.H. Shepard drawings. See the photo of Shan and Lise holding the drawings. Shan pointed out that they handled the photos with care because they are precious and **DELICATE**.]

LISE:

Today Shan and I have been asked to discuss a delicate passage of God's word. We want to handle it with care, to communicate its truths gently, and to appreciate its beauty and value.

SHAN:

In last week's passage from Colossians 3, Paul gave us clear instructions on how to live in light of the theme of this letter: "Jesus Over Everything."

LISE:

Today we're looking at Colossians 3:18-4:1. In these verses, Paul gives specific instructions on how to apply these principles in three key areas of our lives: marriage, parenting, and the workplace.

SHAN:

Let's read Colossians 3:18-4:1.

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers,[a] do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. 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. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

LISE:

This is why we said it would be delicate. This passage has so much wisdom to offer us in our most important relationships. But it has also been misapplied in damaging and dangerous ways.

SHAN:

The words in this passage on wives and on slaves have been used to justify and excuse abuse and oppression. These principles have been twisted out of context to benefit the selfish desires of people in power.

LISE:

I know many people who have been hurt by the misuse of these verses. If that's your story, I'm so sorry. Whatever baggage you bring to this passage, we invite you to set it down, just for a few minutes, and listen to what we can learn from it.

SHAN:

It's important to know that Paul is writing to a Roman culture that gave men unlimited power over women, children, and slaves as the head of the family. Scripture elevates the value of women, children, and slaves in a way that was unheard of. The Bible provides specific instructions for those in positions of control—commands that were completely out of step with what was "normal" in society at the time. But we also have to ask, "What is this saying to us in 2023?"

LISE:

Exactly. First, we all have to deal with our distaste for submission. Humans have been bad at submitting since the Garden of Eden. We want our own way.

SHAN:

But it's pretty clear to anyone who has ever been in any kind of relationship that demanding your own way all the time isn't going to work. Especially in a marriage.

Let's put this passage in the context of Ephesians 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Healthy relationships among believers require an outlook of mutual submission—a willingness to release our own preferences out of love for someone else and reverence for Christ.

LISE:

Whenever Scripture calls us to submit—whether to government authorities, church leaders, the workplace, or the family structure—we are called to reverential submission. This is not the submission of an inferior to a superior, but a submission of love and willing sacrifice for the good of the other and love of God.

We'd like to take some time to talk about what Scripture teaches us about having marriages that honor God and one another—and some things we've learned along the way.

SHAN:

We've been married for 27 years [see online sermon for a wedding photo of Shan and Lise], but this does not make me an expert at being a husband.

Colossians 3:19 says, "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." But in Ephesians 5:25, Paul goes even further, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." For husbands, the command is more demanding than it is for wives. If husbands think about marriage as an opportunity for authority, power, and getting what they want, then they've missed the point. Husbands are commanded to put their wives before themselves, to care for them, to provide leadership and guidance in the family.

LISE:

So, for you, what does that look like practically? How do you see yourself as a leader in our home?

SHAN:

If we are to love our wives as Christ loved the church, then let's look at Jesus' actions. How did Jesus love the Church? What did that look like? I would point out three words: serve, equip, and invest.

First, **serve**. One thing Jesus did was to serve. Jesus gave his life for the church. As another example, he got down and washed his disciples' feet. Any kind of attitude of entitlement runs contrary to the idea of service. When men don't help shoulder the burden of the daily tasks of life—household chores, that kind of thing—we are not following the example of Jesus. What other ways can a husband serve his wife? There are so many! A husband can show empathy. A husband can show gratitude. A husband can publicly honor his bride, and the list goes on and on.

Second, **equip**. Jesus equips his followers. He gives us spiritual gifts and invites us to use them in his kingdom. Husbands can recognize the gifts and abilities of their wives and provide an environment where those abilities grow and flourish.

Third, **invest**. The most important thing a husband can do is invest in his own relationship with God. Jesus sought time alone with the Father *so that* he could know the Father's will and lead and love his followers well. Husbands, we have to spend time on our own relationship with Jesus *so that* we will be able to love our wives and families well.

LISE:

I love that, and I see so many ways you have done that for me. Wives can also offer the same gifts to their husbands—serve them, equip them, and invest in our own relationship with God. When both partners are pursuing Jesus, they lay such a beautiful, solid foundation for when the storms of life come. Anything else you want to say to husbands?

SHAN:

God has given husbands the role of ultimate spiritual responsibility in the family. Many husbands wish they could take the lead spiritually in their homes, but they think their wives are better equipped to do it. And so we hand over leadership to our wives, leadership which is our responsibility.

We're called to lead. In my mind that means we have to step up. When I see myself not doing those things that draw me closer to God, I feel a holy discontent and responsibility for both my own lack of spiritual growth and any lack of spiritual health in my wife and in my boys. God has asked me to lead well spiritually as my first responsibility.

LISE:

I have to admit that I've struggled to understand the command for wives to submit to their husbands and the leadership role in the family that Scripture gives to husbands. Honestly, I'm still figuring it out.

But I think most wives who are Christ-followers really long for their husbands to take an active role in setting the spiritual direction for the family. If I want my husband to lead spiritually, I have to give him the space to do that. His role in our family isn't so much one of ultimate authority but of ultimate accountability. What does submission look like for me? It looks like bringing my best gifts and abilities, experience, perspective, and wisdom, and offering them to him in service of the spiritual responsibility we share, but that he ultimately bears. It looks like being his willing partner in the duties God places in our lives, great and small.

A lot of Christian women feel like they are dragging their husbands along—that the guys just kind of put up with their wives' faith rather than becoming active participants. Ideally, marriage is a partnership where both people are seeking Jesus together.

SHAN:

Kids know when Dad is not prioritizing both his own spiritual health and the family's spiritual health and growth. As husbands and fathers, can our families see that our relationship with God is a priority?

Lise, what thoughts do you have on godly marriage?

LISE:

I've made a lot of mistakes, and I've learned a few things. Some can apply to both husbands and wives.

If you have a choice between being angry and laughing, choose to laugh.

Remember the power of your words to build up or tear down. I remember making a joke at Shan's expense in front of friends. I thought I was hilarious until I saw the look of hurt on his face. Be mindful of how to speak to and about your spouse, especially in front of others.

Your husband is not a mind reader, and his inability to read your mind is not a measure of his love for you.

Women spend the dating and the early years of marriage complaining about how much time their husbands spend with guy friends, then spend the rest of their married lives grieving their husbands' lack of deep male friendships to turn to in times of need. Our spouses cannot meet all of our emotional and relational needs and should not be expected to. Invest in your friendships and encourage your spouse to do the same.

But be mindful of any relationship that threatens the bond of your marriage. If you find yourself thinking a little too much about that other person, put up walls immediately between yourself and that person.

Sometimes when I've thought Shan was being selfish, I was really the one being selfish.

Marriage is such a vulnerable experience—we bare ourselves completely to each other, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Scripture calls it a “one flesh” relationship. So when we speak harshly to or about our spouses—when we are critical and unsupportive—we are damaging that bond, and damaging ourselves. There are absolutely times when husbands and wives have to have honest conversations about concerns or hurtful behaviors. But can we treat our spouses with the gentleness, compassion, and forgiveness we long for when we face our own shortcomings?

SHAN:

I think we can agree that neither of us are the perfect spouse and that we have a long way to go to be all that Jesus would have us to be. Pastor and author Tim Keller said, "It takes both spouses to say, 'My self-centeredness is the main problem in my marriage' to have a great marriage."

We know that in this room there are marriages that are struggling. Some of you are hurting, and a sermon like this causes pain.

LISE:

You may have a million questions. What do I do if my husband or wife doesn't love Jesus? If trust has been broken? If there is infidelity or abuse? If I'm willing to serve and sacrifice but my spouse is not?

SHAN:

As a church, we want to offer you help and resources. We have two paths we'd like to suggest: sign up for the Sacred Marriage conference November 17 and 18, or schedule a care appointment at thecreek.org/care.

For those of you who are not married but would like to be, please consider what we've said today when you seek a spouse. Physical attractiveness, success, and a sense of humor may spark initial attraction, but the most important quality you can have in a mate is someone who is a fully devoted follower of Jesus, someone who understands that marriage is about cooperation and sacrifice, about seeking the good of the other ahead of yourself.

LISE:

One last thought about marriage [view the online sermon to hear the dance analogy]. It takes years of practice to become good dancers. Don't be too surprised that good marriages take a lifetime.

SHAN:

Should we talk about children and parents now?

LISE:

Yeah, we'd probably better.

SHAN:

Colossians 3:20-21 says, “Children, obey your parents in everything for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.” The word “embitter” here is often translated as “exasperate.” Let’s face it. Parents—maybe especially fathers—are pretty good at exasperating their children. [View the online sermon for a story about Shan and Lise’s kids seeing Barney.]

Let us share four quick ideas of how parents make their kids bitter toward them in unhealthy ways.

The first way we make our kids bitter is through **hypocrisy**. Studies show that a big reason young adults walk away from their faith is their parents’ hypocrisy. The “do as I say not as I do” approach to parenting doesn’t work. One time, when Lise was away, I decided to show my young boys the movie *Top Gun*. But after the first five minutes I turned it off. I couldn’t show them a movie with language that was inconsistent with how a believer should speak. We need to ask for God’s help to be the kind of people we want our kids to be, and the kind of people God wants us to be.

A second way we make our kids bitter is **reacting in anger** rather than responding with grace and discipline. I remember disciplining one of my boys in anger many years ago. I also remember the look of fear in his eyes. I promised that day that I would never do it again and I let God work on my anger. My boys sometimes needed discipline, but they needed a godly response of discipline with grace, not the response of a father in anger.

LISE:

A third way we embitter our kids is with **overloaded schedules and unrealistic expectations**. Families live at a frenetic pace. Our schedules are packed. We also live in a pressure cooker of unrealistic expectations. This is a toxic combo.

I’m ashamed of how many times I lost it with my kids not because they did anything wrong or immoral, but because their pace, their needs, their schedules—their plain “kidness”—got in the way of doing “all the things.” Some of my worst mommy moments came when I was controlled by my own unrealistic expectations of my kids rather than God’s expectations of me.

Parents, I beg you to prayerfully evaluate your schedules and priorities. Is there time for rest, play, and worship in your family life? Or is your schedule determined by society’s perceptions of success and accomplishment?

A wise and dear friend said to me, “Lise, the goal is heaven, not Harvard.”

Now, I’m not saying that kids can’t go to heaven *and* Harvard. The point is that even if your kid achieves the highest possible level of accomplishment on this earth, if that comes at the

expense of the relational health of your family, and most of all your child's faith journey, those accomplishments will be failures.

And if your kid never gets the scholarship, never wins the championship, is never cast in the lead, but knows and loves Jesus, then you will have an eternity to enjoy your child.

A fourth way we embitter our kids is by **refusing to allow our kids to transition to independence**. [View the online sermon to hear the kids in the bathtub story.] My prayer about the boys was they belong to God; may I never get in the way of what he has planned for them. God has given us authority as parents and calls us to use it. He invites us to embody his love and discipline to our kids. But he also calls us to gradually step aside, to move into an advisory capacity, so that our adult children can learn to interact with him directly, rather than having us as the intermediary.

When we overstep this boundary—and it's a slippery, invisible line—we can embitter our children, damaging our relationship with them and potentially their relationship with God. So in the years that our “active parenting” ends, wise parents prayerfully pursue wisdom and guidance as we adjust to our new role as listeners, advisors, and coaches.

We focused this part of the message on parents because we know that is mostly who is in the room today.

But we've got middle school and high school students in this service, and I wouldn't want you to think we've forgotten you, so let me say just a few quick words.

Your parents love you and seek your good more than anyone else. There are definitely exceptions, and if that's your story, I'm sorry. But your parents are not perfect. As you reach your teen years, the dynamics change and they are trying to figure it all out as much as you are. They want to keep you safe. They long for a relationship with you. That's why they ask all those annoying questions.

God commands that you respect and obey your parents. As with all of God's commands, obedience often brings sweet gifts into our lives. If you begin to listen to your parents, obey them cheerfully, respond to them respectfully, and disagree with them in a spirit of kindness and submission, you will probably discover that they will grant you more freedom and that your own spirit will be more at peace as you walk in obedience to God.

SHAN:

Just as we said when we talked about marriage, we know that some of you are in situations that go far beyond the scope of this sermon. If you are a young person and you are experiencing neglect or abuse, please reach out to a trusted adult for help, or reach out to us on the Porch or in the church office.

LISE:

One more thing. My father left when I was 11. I have such a heart for single parents or families in extreme and difficult circumstances. The point of this message is not to put more guilt and pressure on moms or dads who are barely holding things together. We love you and so does your heavenly Father, who can come in and fill the gaps for all the ways we fall short as parents.

SHAN:

Now let's talk about the third area of relational interaction Paul addresses, the workplace.

LISE:

This passage uses terms that are rightly troubling: slaves and masters. Paul does not approve of slavery. He's acknowledging the reality of the position many Christians found themselves in and teaching them how to live within that. In other places, he does invite Christian slave owners to set their slaves free and view them as brothers and sisters in Christ. And ultimately Christian teachings did lead to the abolition of slavery in the Roman empire.

There are clear parallels in this passage to our workplaces today and our positions as either employees or bosses, or both.

SHAN:

I would like to point out two things. First, **we should always do our best at our job because our ultimate boss is Jesus**. We shouldn't work hard just when the boss is around. In my case, when Dan isn't in town, I still come to the office and work hard. Though I work for Dan, I also work for the elders of The Creek, and ultimately, I work for God. I need to recognize that all the work I do, whether I work at a church or I work at McDonald's or I work at a corporation downtown, Jesus is my ultimate boss. That means we shouldn't be sloppy, we shouldn't be lazy, we shouldn't be unethical. [View the online sermon to hear a story about Shan's first job.]

Colossians 3:17 tells us that we need to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and verse 23 tells us that we need to work as if we are working for God and not for men, so the second thing I would point out is that no matter what we do, **our work is a calling from God**. All honest work has dignity and value. God invites you to find purpose and joy in whatever you do. For the students in the room, this includes schoolwork. If you are an employer, a supervisor, or a manager—if anyone reports to you—you are commanded to provide what is *right* and *fair* to those that work for you. Empathy, fairness, and prayerful leadership are owed to those under the care of a believer.

LISE:

When it comes to our most significant relationships—marriage, family, and the workplace—God not only asks us to live in a way that shows honor to him, he invites us to live in a way that proclaims his gospel message to a watching world.

Do those around you have an opportunity to witness a depiction of the gospel in how you live your life?

Do they see marriages that are a picture of the profound love and bond between Christ and his church?

Do they see parents who model the loving authority of our Heavenly Father, not seeking their own preference and convenience, but teaching their children to obey what is good and wise?

Do they see children who willingly come under the authority of their parents in their growing up years instead of being guided by their own emotions and ego?

Do they see bosses, managers, and business owners who place people above profit, who are just in their dealings with their employees, recognizing that they have a master in heaven, too?

Do they see employees and students who work with integrity, completing their tasks with excellence, not only when the boss or teacher is around, but always recognizing that it is Christ they are serving?

In all of our relationships, do we behave in a way that makes the gospel message more appealing to those around us? And are we placing Jesus over everything?

SHAN:

[View the online sermon to hear the “fly the plane first” story.]

There are lots of instructions in this passage. But if we focus on obeying the instructions without prioritizing our relationship with Jesus, we will be like a pilot who focuses on the radio and the instrumentation but forgets to fly the plane. We “fly first” by putting Jesus over everything. Then he will teach us to live in our relationships in a way that pleases him.

As we close today, we want to take the Lord's Supper together to answer that question—is Jesus first in your life? In a moment, you'll have an opportunity to take the bread, to remember the body of Jesus given for you. You'll have a chance to take the juice, to remember the blood of Jesus spilled out for you. In doing so, we remember his amazing sacrifice for us. But we also have the opportunity to examine our own lives in light of that gift. If Jesus really is first in our lives, then he will change us. He will change our relationships.

We'll have the doors to the Porch open. We'll also have people down across the front, including Lise and me, available to pray with you if you'd like.

Lise, would you pray for us?

LISE:

Father in heaven, tune our hearts to your music. Teach us to live out the gospel in our lives so that we experience the joy that comes from obedience to you and so that we show a watching world the riches of your grace and the depths of your love. Amen.