



Colossians for Women:

Living in Christ

What do you think of when you hear the word “mature”? Especially at this time of the year, gardeners might envision ripening fruit or vegetables. Or, if you’re a mother you may long for the day when your child acts responsibly and thinks about oncoming traffic before crossing the road. More generally, we may use words like grown-up or adult, developed and fully grown, in our definition of maturity. Maturing is about change, development.

Maturity is one of the big themes of Colossians. A key sentence of this book is in Colossians 2:6: *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him...”* Paul tells his readers that they need to develop deep roots in the gospel of Jesus, to keep growing, becoming more and more mature.

What is godly maturity?

Two defining characteristics of Christians are that they have faith in the Lord Jesus and that they love all other believers (1:4).¹ These are key indicators that they are in Christ, and demonstrate that they have died, been buried, and have now been raised with him, receiving a new life (2:12).

So, says Paul to the Colossian readers (and also to us in the twenty-first century), just as you received Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him. That is: keep growing, continue maturing. Earlier, he had stated his vision about this maturity. He writes that his wish for the Colossians is that they are filled with the *“knowledge of God’s will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding”* (1:9). He wants this so that, as they mature, the Colossians would *“live a life worthy of the Lord ... (pleasing) him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God”* (1:10). That, in a nutshell, is what maturity looked like in followers of the Lord Jesus in the first century after Christ.

It is no different today. Christian women, whether younger, married, single, mums of little ones when home is so important and the daily round of caring for needy children can be all-consuming, or mothers of the “middle years” when bumper stickers about the car being “mum’s taxi” sound all too real, those in fulltime employment outside the home, leaders of Bible studies or once-in-a-while-attendees, or of aging years, all have the same call: to mature in the Lord – to grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding, to know what pleases the Lord and then to do it.

Limitless resources

The question is: how do we do this? How do we mature? We’ve already established in these articles on Colossians that Jesus is central in answering this question: in him we are already complete, with nothing to add from within ourselves (2:10). If I have died and risen again (in Jesus), then I am no longer my former self, but reborn. I am part of God’s new kingdom, begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and my new life is part of the restoration of all things he set in motion. Indeed, he has given me a new identity. I am God’s chosen one, holy and beloved (3:12), privileged beyond all imagination!

This is the foundation on which to live out of the principles of Christian living found in *Colossians* 3 and 4. The challenge we all face is to learn to live on the limitless resources that are in Christ, to

move forward in him. Wendy Alsup in *Practical Theology for Women: How Knowing God Makes all the Difference in our Lives* puts it this way:

...apart from abiding in Christ and meditating on the benefits of our relationship with him, we will be hamstrung in every attempt to handle life on our own. Apart from him, we can do nothing. (A)word picture (in the Bible) of our unity with Christ is that he is the head and we are his body (Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22-3) ... (T)his analogy points to our supernatural connection to Jesus and our utter dependence upon him. A body has no power apart from its head. Most of us have witnessed someone struggle with quadriplegia, paralysis of the body from the neck down. When our body loses connection to our head, we can't feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, or control our movements. This is a perfect illustration of what happens spiritually when we are "not holding fast to the Head" (Col 2:19). We must hold fast to Jesus, abide in him, and take full advantage of the power available to us through our identity in him

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Whatever you lack in spiritual maturity, God will provide. As Jesus said, "ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7) and, elsewhere: "you may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:14). Do you struggle to love somebody in your church or family? Do you resort far too often to yelling in anger at your children? Do you lie awake at night, worrying? Ask God to help you get over these things, to stop these destructive (and sinful) patterns. He has limitless resources and has promised to hear your requests. Nothing is too difficult for him. Don't we teach our children when they are still very young that God always keeps his promises? Believe it for yourself, and, as you live it out, trusting in his provision, you *will* mature!

Living relationally

The focus of *Colossians* 3 and 4 is how we live out the reality of being in Christ. Chapter 3 contrasts what we were (such as sexually immoral, impure, covetous, angry, prone to lie and slander), and instead highlights that the lives of those who have risen with Christ now reflect his person: compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving, and, above all, loving (3:12-14).

The changed reality in our relationship with God through Jesus also changes our relationships with each other. We recognise that the characteristics of the old nature destroy relationships; Christlike behaviour, on the other hand, restores and builds others up. I'd like to focus on this for the remainder of this article, and again in a follow-up article. For now, though, I'll focus on how maturity in Christ affects relationships within marriage.

Christ's death and resurrection brings order and peace into our relationships, including our marriages. It hardly needs to be said, but marriages, too, have been affected by the fall (Genesis 3) and need redeeming. The good news of the New Testament is that these, too, are able to thrive once more. Since we have a new life in Christ, our marriages, too, will reflect the change within us. Our former selves value earthly things like personal autonomy and selfish wishes. Changed people, however, who are now in a right relationship with the Lord, recognise the beauty of harmony within relationships, of submitting to each other, and exhibiting the Christlike characteristics of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, as found in 3:12-14. These changed personalities of both husband and wife are the bedrock of a marriage that pleases the Lord.

With respect to marriage, Paul didn't establish anything new as such; he simply restated principles already established in Genesis 1. There is a New Testament focus in our marriages, however: married folk are to set their hearts on things above, to focus first of all on the Lord Jesus, putting to death their sinful natures and clothing themselves instead with all that is good. In this context, husbands are to love their wives and wives are to submit to their husbands (3:18-19). Marriage relationships such as these are beautiful, and mirror properly an even deeper mystery: the restored relationship between Christ and his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:32).

Example for wives: submission

How does this work out in practice? For example, what does it mean for a wife to submit to her husband? Paul doesn't elaborate specifically, although we do need to read this short statement in the wider context of the rest of Colossians. We can find out a little more from parallel passages such as Ephesians 5, 1 Peter 3, and Titus 2, but the Bible gives very little detail, and so it is important that in a discussion about this we are not overly prescriptive. We can, however, draw some principles about the tone of our homes from 3:12-14, already referred to. We can think about the meaning of the word (submit), with its implication that the husband has responsibility for his wife's welfare (she places herself under his love and leadership), and that in their submission wives lay down any assertions of independence. The etymology of the English word submission also gives us some clues in how to understand this concept. It has in it the words "sub" (meaning under) and "mission" (an important assignment) – implying that a wife places herself under her husband's mission.

This image helps me in my own marriage. In my case, my husband's "mission" includes: leading our family spiritually/training our son to understand the gospel, leadership within our church as an elder, running a small business (and there are plenty of subsets of these). There's no question that we're a team and that, in many ways, we are on a mission together. At the same time, as a wife, my first responsibility is not to pursue what I think is important at the expense of my husband's mission. To give an example, in our family we usually read a passage of Scripture after the evening meal. This is a prime opportunity for my husband to teach our son, and for me, who has plenty of opportunity to teach him throughout the day, to step back. Because I know my son well, it's tempting to clarify the question my husband asks, or to throw in too many of my own (by which time my husband is, once more, a background figure), or to interject with my own longwinded answer, or even to highjack the conversation altogether by raising some other point that results in a discussion between my husband and myself (leaving our son in the background). As a wife who supports her husband's mission in teaching the Scriptures to our son, my role in this particular stage of my son's life, is to say little, to take a back seat.

Of course, my marriage isn't the same as yours. If you are married, what are your husband's missions? Are you helping (or hindering) them? How can you support him better? Do you need to re-prioritise your life in order to do so?

To conclude, the peaceful, ordered relationship between husband and wife is a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the new life he has ushered in for all those who believe in him. It is a very tangible answer to Paul's prayer in 1:10 that believers would live lives worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in every way: bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God. Husband and wife, then, are motivated by the gospel of the Lord Jesus, to relate in a Christlike way to each other, and to respect (and obey) God in the gender distinctives that he has established in marriage.

This, then, is one example of godly maturity.

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¹ Unless otherwise stated all Scripture references come from Colossians.