

Bil Keane (who passed away 10 years ago) began drawing his *Family Circus* cartoon—always enclosed in a circle—in 1960. Life inside that circle of Daddy, Mommy and their four children changed little in the last 60+ years. When *The Family Circus* debuted, it appeared in 19 newspapers. It is now the world’s most widely syndicated single-panel cartoon, carried by about 1,500 papers, with a daily readership of about 100 million. There is no irony, no war or hunger, no anger that a well-meaning parent can’t resolve. If some critics have complained that *The Family Circus* seems hopelessly saccharine and out of date, countless others have found comfort in its *abiding values*.

It is the Apostle Paul’s intention to convey to the believers at Colossae *abiding values* for the Christian family. He brackets his instruction about marriage and family members’ mutual commitment to Christ with two phrases. From verse 17: “*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*” and from verse 24: “*It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*” Keep this in mind as we consider Paul’s instructions for “Serving at Home.” In his instructions the Apostle is expanding on the little phrase we talked about two weeks ago used to describe the new reality for all who believe: ***In Christ***.

In NT Wright’s little study guide which we’re using this summer to walk through Colossians, Wright says that “freedom of choice is one of the *idols* of our time.” Even the suggestion of regulating or curtailing freedom is unthinkable for many people. But what proponents of absolute freedom fail to realize is that every exercise of supposed “free choice” severely limits all subsequent freedoms. The freedom of drivers to drive all over the road without looking just won’t work. We need Rules of the Road. One short free ride down the wrong side of the road could stop us from ever being free to drive anywhere again. So what Paul is offering in this Scripture passage is a very brief Rules of the Road for relationships at home” (*Colossians & Philemon*, p. 41).

Paul has often been criticized as being down on women. The truth is, he presents a radically new view of marriage and family which elevated women and children to a hitherto unthinkable level of equality. The Hebrew and Greek understanding of marriage reduced women to “things” to be used and enjoyed, not loved and cherished. Women were seen as totally subservient to men, not only in society but in the home. It was a man’s world in every way.

Before Paul, Jesus’ attitude toward women and marriage was nothing less than **revolutionary**. He saw and treated women as persons of worth, not merely agents of childbearing. On one occasion the Pharisees tried to entangle him in a dispute about

divorce. Too wise to be trapped, and too compassionate and committed to women to let the issue drop, he forced them to look at the original and eternal intention for marriage. Paul built on Jesus' approach and spelled out implications for the early church. He also founded his teachings on the fact that a person *in Christ* has a new frame of reference, a new Lord of life, and therefore operates out of a totally new understanding of reality. Christian people are brothers and sisters. All of us are recipients of God's grace and in the eyes of the Lord there is no distinction in value between male and female.

Verses 18-21 puts the emphasis on the value of persons. The family, then, is a place for persons—not just a place to eat and sleep, to watch TV, to rest from our work; not just a place where our lunches are packed and our laundry done; not just a place where we park our cars. To be a place for persons, the family must be a place of *caring*. So, Paul specifies each person in the family—wives, husbands, children, even slaves—as he gives specific instruction. We miss the total impact of this if we dissect it and see it only at a particular point. We 21<sup>st</sup> century readers are usually turned off at the first word, “*Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord*” (v. 18).

We would miss a huge part of the meaning of this and dwell on a distorted fragment if we do not see this verse in its context. Submission was not a command strictly for wives in relation to husbands, it was one of the unique marks of a Christian lifestyle. “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,*” that we find in Ephesians 5:21, was a general admonition to *every* Christian. The radical nature of the Gospel is behind a statement like this. Wives, children, slaves had been freed from the stations to which they were confined by their culture. Submission became a matter, not of fitting into the way things were and had always been, but a matter of living as Christ would want us to live. The instruction Paul gave to husbands about their wives and not being bitter toward them, not provoking their children, also adds to this radical new understanding of the preciousness of every person and the fact that “stations in life” were obliterated in terms of subordinate and superior positions within the fellowship of Christ.

Let me go back to the point that the family is to be a *place for caring*, caring for persons who are seen as unique and precious, all of whom are recipients of Christ's infinite love. The family as a *place for caring* makes it where we naturally go and be when all other doors are shut. Because we care, we notice. Because we care, we listen. Because we care, we are honest. Because we care, we share. These are the things that enable us to grow. It is in these caring relationships that we are sustained. How desperately each one of us needs that!

Everything said in this passage is centered *in Christ*. Remember that Paul has just said, “*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (v. 17). There is no problem in a husband being the “head” of the household if the husband’s life is centered in Christ the Lord. For then he will love his wife and children as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. It is interesting to note that the word used for the attitude of wives in relation to the husband is different from that of children in relation to the father. Wives are to *submit*, children to *obey*. For the wife to respect her husband's position as head of the household does not imply inferiority of status. There is no rebellion against or reservation about “submission” if the quality of love in a relationship prohibits either partner from using the other person selfishly. If love in a relationship is not only patterned after but is made possible by our response to the love of Jesus for us, our homes will become places that are filled with love.

Discipline may turn into a harsh system which provokes and discourages children. Paul was aware of this, so he cautioned children and fathers. Obedience is the key word. But we must see obedience in the context of the all-encompassing love of God. We trust God and obey him because we know God desires our ultimate good. As parents we may be able to demand obedience from our children—but that will be short-lived unless our children can trust us, and what will happen to persons in the process will be detrimental, even destructive, unless they are assured that we are committed to their ultimate well-being. Paul used two strong words in verse 21: *erethizō* which means “provoke to anger, or embitter” and *athumeō* which means “to be discouraged, or more literally to have one’s spirit broken.”

Parents’ relationships with children shape their personality and especially influence how they relate to themselves and others. Paul was far ahead of his time in his concern for children. He knew that children could be robbed of their self-respect, have their spirits broken early in life, and eventually pay painfully, sometimes for a lifetime, for being emotionally crippled as a child.

When the family is a place for persons, it becomes a *place of caring*. Where Christ’s love is communicated through a parents’ love and children are affirmed. In that caring context of love, children obey. A persistent pattern of disobedience on the part of the children in a family is usually a distortion or a perversion of love.

Where the family is the *center of caring*, the wife may be asked to be submissive to her husband—but submissive to his love, not his tyranny! A father has authority over his children, but it must be an authority that is trusted. Therefore, it is authoritative, not authoritarian. The husband and father is to set the pattern of caring, loving as Jesus loved.

The family is to be a place for persons which becomes a *place of caring*. That means it is to be a cameo of community. Perceptive observers of the past forty years of human interactions in the United States contend that there have been two dominant and ostensibly secular quests going on. One is the search for *a personal lifestyle*, a way of achieving a significant life as an individual. The other is a search for *a sustaining community*. Persons remain fragmented when these searches are divided, because both needs are interrelated, and both are necessary to sustain us. People remain fragmented when the search is divided, for both needs are interrelated, and both depend on the other.

While these quests may be ostensibly secular, they are implicitly spiritual, and have been the major force of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The quest for a personal lifestyle that provides significance and meaning and for a sustaining community that supports us in adversity are satisfied in authentic Christianity. And the family plays a significant role in both of these quests, especially in the search for sustaining community.

More and more, the pressures of modern living are forcing us to look to a smaller and smaller circle for our fundamental human satisfactions and self-worth. The mobility of our time, moving here and there, scattering our energies, severing of our larger family ties which is a result of the move away from rural communities toward an urban culture—all make us strangers to those around us. The family, commonly reduced to a mother and father and children because geographical location excludes grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins—that small family becomes the key to building community. This is the reason I mention a “cameo” of community. The small nuclear family to which we belong is usually not adequate to sustain us as persons, but this core family can and should be a “cameo” of community, the place where we can learn and practice what community—Christian community—is all about.

This calls for the kind of caring we have already talked about; it also calls for honesty of communication, transparency of character, openness to the necessity of difference; the willingness to risk the pain of conflict, which is necessary for growth; the cultivation of freedom which is the key to personhood; and the insistence on and commitment to responsibility which is the key to living in relationship. Above all, it calls for a commitment to Christ and a willingness to be submissive to one another “*as is fitting in the Lord*” (3:18).

“Serving at Home” is the first step to learning how we can serve the church, serve one another, and ultimately serve the world. Amen.