

Household Codes in the New Testament

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Like many other Greco-Roman moral writings, four of the *later* NT letters contain passages with instructions for particular groups of people within Christian families or "households" as to how they should treat other members of their household. Since they are similar to legal or moral "codes" of conduct, these texts are often called "household codes."

Most people in the Roman Empire in the first century took it for granted that a *pater familias* (a "father of the family") had absolute authority and control over his household. Thus, the non-Christian examples of such "household codes" usually just indicate how slaves, children, or wives should act toward their masters, fathers, or husbands, respectively. They rarely also tell the men how they should treat the slaves, children, or wives who are members of their household. The "household codes" in the NT are somewhat similar to, but also significantly different from their non-Christian counterparts. These NT texts do not give absolute power to men, but instead require a high degree of responsibility and mutual respect for all members of Christian families. Admittedly, since these first-century codes do not use completely identical wording in all their sub-sections, they do not seem to show the full "equality" of the various members of a household (as many people might wish today). However, the structure and language of these NT household codes do prescribe a much greater degree of "mutuality" than we might expect at first glance.

Through a careful study of these four "household codes" (Col 3:18—4:1, Eph 5:21—6:9, Titus 2:1-10, and 1 Peter 2:18—3:7), we can see exactly *which groups are addressed* (in which verses) in each letter, and *what they are told to do*. Moreover, since the whole letter to the Ephesians is a later expansion of the letter to the Colossians, it is worth analyzing the first two household codes more closely. Aside from obviously being much longer, *exactly how* is Eph 5:21—6:9 *different* from Col 3:18—4:1? *What motivations* are added and/or made more explicit in Ephesians as to *why* certain groups should act in the ways the author recommends?

Col 3:18—4:1	Eph 5:21—6:9	Titus 2:1-10	1 Peter 2:18—3:7
[cf. 3:1-17 addressed to all : lists of vices and virtues]	[all] : be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:21)	you (sg.): teach what is consistent with sound doctrine (2:1). Tell the <i>[following groups]</i> to...	[all of you] : have unity of spirit, etc. (<i>at end</i> : 3:8-12)
wives : be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord (3:18)	wives : be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord, etc. (5:22-24)	older men : be temperate, serious, prudent, sound in faith, love, etc. (2:2)	wives : accept husbands' authority; don't adorn your-selves outwardly (3:1-6)
husbands : love your wives and never treat them harshly (3:19)	husbands : love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church, etc. (5:25-33)	older women : be reverent, not slander, teach and encourage younger women (2:3-5)	husbands : be considerate of your wives, paying honor to them (3:7)
children : obey your parents in everything... your accept-able duty in the Lord (3:20)	children : obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right, etc. (6:1-3)	[younger women] : love their husbands and children, be self-controlled (2:4-5)]	x
fathers : do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart (3:21)	fathers : do not provoke you children to anger; bring them up in the Lord (6:4)	younger men : be self-controlled, do good works, say nothing evil, etc. (2:6-8)	x
slaves : obey earthly masters in everything... fearing the Lord (3:22-25)	slaves : obey your earthly masters, as you obey Christ (6:5-8)	slaves : be submissive to their masters; not talk back, be faithful, etc. (2:9-10)	slaves : accept masters' authority, even if you suffer; Christ also suffered (<i>at beginning</i> : 2:18-25)
masters : treat your slaves justly and fairly; you also have a Master in heaven (4:1)	masters : stop threatening your slaves; you have the same Master in heaven (6:9)	x	x

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