

## The Rules<sup>1</sup> for the Household<sup>1</sup>

The admonitions addressed successively to wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters, are introduced without any connective transition. They form a self-contained and clearly delimited section within the letter.<sup>2</sup> Parallels are found in Eph 5:22–6:9\*; 1 Tim 2:8–15\*; 6:1–2\*; Tit 2:1–10\*; 1 Pt 2:13–

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<sup>1</sup>Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Translation of *Die Briefe an die Kolosser Und an Philemon.*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 154. **NOTE: footnote numbering is not consistent because of problems in copying material from Logos Systems into MS Word document.**

<sup>1</sup>Cf. the commentaries on 3:18–4:1\*, especially Dibelius-Greeven. Cf. further: Karl Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln: Ein Stück urchristlicher Paränese*. Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 14 (Leipzig: 1928); Heinz Dietrich Wendland, "Zur soziaethischen Bedeutung der neutestamentlichen Haustafeln," in *Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes, Festschrift für Adolf Köberle* (Hamburg: 1958), 34–46 (= *Die Botschaft an die soziale Welt* [Hamburg: 1959], 104–14); D. Schroeder, *Die Haustafeln des Neuen Testaments: Ihre Herkunft und ihr theologischer Sinn*. Unpub. Diss. (Hamburg: 1959); Merk, *Handeln*, 214–24.

<sup>2</sup>Verse 4:2\*: "be watchful ... with thanksgiving" (γρηγοροῦντες ... ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ) would connect smoothly with 3:17\*: "give thanks to God" (εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ).

\*<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.

<sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.

<sup>24</sup> Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

<sup>26</sup> in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,

<sup>27</sup> so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

<sup>28</sup> In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

<sup>29</sup> For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,

<sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body.

<sup>31</sup> "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

<sup>32</sup> This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

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<sup>33</sup> Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

<sup>1</sup> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

<sup>2</sup> “Honor your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise:

<sup>3</sup> “so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

<sup>4</sup> And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Only first 15 verses of range shown) [Ephesians 5:22–6:9](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>8</sup> I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument;

<sup>9</sup> also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes,

<sup>10</sup> but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.

<sup>11</sup> Let a woman learn in silence with full submission.

<sup>12</sup> I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

<sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve;

<sup>14</sup> and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

<sup>15</sup> Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. [1 Timothy 2:8–15](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>1</sup> Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed.

<sup>2</sup> Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties. [1 Timothy 6:1–2](#) (NRSV)

\*<sup>1</sup> But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.

<sup>2</sup> Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance.

<sup>3</sup> Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good,

<sup>4</sup> so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,

3:7\* and in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.<sup>3</sup> It is quite obvious that an exhortatory tradition has been utilized in these sentences—a tradition which had played an important part in the teaching of the

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<sup>5</sup> to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.

<sup>7</sup> Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity,

<sup>8</sup> and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.

<sup>9</sup> Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back,

<sup>10</sup> not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior. [Titus 2:1–10](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>13</sup> For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme,

<sup>14</sup> or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.

<sup>15</sup> For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.

<sup>16</sup> As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.

<sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.

<sup>19</sup> For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.

<sup>20</sup> If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.

<sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

<sup>23</sup> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

communities. In the second and third Christian generation, answers had to be given to the many questions that pressed upon Christians in their everyday lives. In answering these questions, Christians did not renounce the world and flee it, but faced it head-on and tried to learn from the rules of life which had been formulated and practiced in Hellenistic popular philosophy. Christians took over many directives which had attained wide circulation as successful guidelines to life and its problems, and made use of them in the community's preaching and instruction. Just as Hellenistic or Jewish traditions were often drawn upon for exhortatory material, so too traditional patterns for rules of conduct which presented tried and true examples of ethical instruction were used, in particular for the development of the so-called *Haustafeln* (rules for the household).<sup>4</sup>

In the instruction of contemporary popular philosophy, a fixed schema listed the duties which a conscientious man had to fulfill. For example, Polybius depicts the exemplary conduct of Attalus within the circle of his family and says: "he lived ever most virtuous and austere as husband and father, never breaking his faith to his friends and allies" (σωφρονέστατα μὲν ἐβίωσε καὶ σεμνότατα πρὸς γυναῖκα καὶ τέκνα, διεφύλαξε δὲ τὴν πρὸς πάντας τοὺς συμμάχους καὶ φίλους πίστιν 18, 41, 8f). The excerpts of Hierocles in Stobaeus contain a detailed catalog of ethical teachings: on conduct toward the gods, fatherland, parents, brothers, relatives, work, marriage and children.<sup>5</sup> With various modifications this schema recurs in the common moral teaching of the Stoics.<sup>6</sup> Thus Epictetus teaches that a true student would say to him: "I want also, as a god-fearing man, a philosopher, and a diligent student, to know what is my duty toward

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<sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

<sup>1</sup> Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct,

<sup>2</sup> when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.

<sup>3</sup> Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; (Only first 15 verses of range shown) 1 Peter 2:13–3:7 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Did 4:9–11; Barn 19:5–7; 1 Clem 21:6–9; Pol. Phil. 4:2–6:3.

<sup>4</sup> These rules for the household are not, insofar as their content is considered, "a genuinely Christian creation" and thus they cannot, without further ado, be considered to be "applied kerygma" (this is the position of Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Die neutestamentlichen Mahnungen an die Frau, sich dem Manne unterzuordnen" in *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum, Festschrift für Otto Schmitz*, ed. Werner Foerster [Witten: 1953], 136, 141 n. 24; Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Mann und Frau im Urchristentum" in *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen* 12 [Köln and Opladen: 1954], 24f, 32). Rather a distinction must be drawn between the ethical directives which were developed in the cultural environment and their adoption and new justification by the Christian community. Schroeder, *Die Haustafeln*, 79–107, wants to explain the NT house rules as a genuinely Christian construction which had its roots in the adoption of a form developed in the OT and Judaism, namely, that of divine law. For a critique of this view cf. below p. 157, n. 15 and Merk, *Handeln*, 215f.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the brief analysis of these excerpts found in Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln*, 27–33.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the material assembled in Dibelius-Greeven, 48–50 and Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln*, 34–39.

the gods, toward parents, toward brothers, toward my country, toward strangers” (θέλω δ’ ὡς εὐσεβῆς καὶ φιλόσοφος καὶ ἐπιμελῆς εἰδέναι τί μοι πρὸς θεοῦς ἐστὶ καθήκον, τί πρὸς γονεῖς, τί πρὸς ἀδελφούς, τί πρὸς τὴν πατρίδα, τί πρὸς ξένους *Diss.* 2, 17, 31). The purpose of the ethical instruction is to spell out those things that should be done at any given time as one’s “duty” (καθήκον) toward the gods, parents, friends, fatherland, and strangers: “Befitting acts are all those which reason prevails upon us to do; and this is the case with honoring one’s parents, brothers and country, and intercourse with friends” (καθήκοντα μὲν οὖν εἶναι ὅσα λόγος αἰρεῖ ποιεῖν, ὡς ἔχει τὸ γονεῖς τιμᾶν, ἀδελφούς, πατρίδα, συμπεριφέρεσθαι φίλοις Diogenes Laertius 7, 108). In Stoic “tranquillity” (ἀταραξία) man will know how to discern what is right and to do it: “maintaining with his associates both the natural and the acquired relationships, those namely of son, father, brother, citizen, wife, neighbour, fellow-traveller, ruler, and subject” (μετὰ τῶν κοινωνῶν τηροῦντα τὰς σχέσεις τὰς τε φυσικὰς καὶ ἐπιθέτους, τὸν υἱόν, τὸν πατέρα, τὸν ἀδελφόν, τὸν πολίτην, τὸν ἄνδρα, τὴν γυναῖκα, τὸν γείτονα, τὸν σύνοδον, τὸν ἄρχοντα, τὸν ἀρχόμενον Epictetus, *Diss.* 2, 14, 8). Everyone has to consider what task is allotted to him in his situation. He will receive correct guidance on that task from philosophy, “which supplies precepts appropriate to the individual case, instead of framing them for mankind at large—which, for instance, advises how a husband should conduct himself toward his wife, or a father should bring up his children, or how a master should rule his slaves” (quae dat propria cuique personae praecepta nec in universum componit hominem, sed marito suadet quomodo se gerat adversum uxorem, patri quomodo educet liberos, domino quomodo servos regat. Seneca, *Epist.* 94, 1).<sup>7</sup>

Hellenistic Judaism borrowed this schema of ethical instruction from the popular philosophy of antiquity and, with slight modifications, used it in its synagogue teaching.<sup>8</sup> Instead of worship of the gods, stress was now laid on obedience to the one God, whose commandments had to be kept. The didactic poem of Ps-Phocylides lists, one after another, the duties that had to be fulfilled in marriage, in the procreation and rearing of children, in relationships with friends and relatives, and in the treatment of slaves (175–227). From the commandment on honoring parents Philo of Alexandria derives a number of concomitant commandments, namely, “the [laws] drawn up to deal with the relations of old to young, rulers to subjects, benefactors, to benefited, slaves to masters” (τοὺς ἐπὶ πρεσβύταις καὶ νέοις ἀναγραφέντας [*scil* νόμου], τοὺς ἐπ’ ἄρχουσι καὶ ὑπηκόοις, τοὺς ἐπ’ εὐεργέταις καὶ εὐπεπονθόσι, τοὺς ἐπὶ δούλοις καὶ δεσπότηταις *De decal.* 165). For the parents belong to the superior class, that of rulers, benefactors, and master. On the other hand, the children occupy the lower class together with juniors, subjects, receivers of benefits, and slaves. The lower class should honor and respect the superior class while the superior class should care for the lower class (*De decal.* 165–67).<sup>9</sup> In *Ap.* 2, 198–210 Josephus gives a list of Jewish laws and prohibitions. Beginning with the worship of God, he then mentions proper conduct in marriage, in the rearing of children, the burial of the dead, and love of parents. He concludes with the duties to be fulfilled in one’s relationships with friends and with strangers.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning ethical teaching in Hellenistic popular philosophy, cf. further Albrecht Dihle, *Die goldene Regel: Eine Einführung in die Geschichte der antiken und frühchristlichen Vulgäretik*, Studienhefte zur Altertumswissenschaft 7 (Göttingen: 1962).

<sup>8</sup> In Palestinian Judaism and especially in Rabbinic literature there are no “rules for the household.” Under the heading “Haustafeln” David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 2, 1952 (London: Univ. of London, Athlone, 1956), 90–105 deals with the meaning of the participle used with imperatival force (cf. thereto above p. 32, n. 1)—not, however, with the contents and construction of the NT “rules for the household” which undoubtedly were adopted from the Hellenistic cultural milieu.

<sup>9</sup> Further examples from Philo’s writings can be found in Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln*, 25f.

In the ethics of Hellenistic popular philosophy, which was probably transmitted to the Christian communities via the Hellenistic synagogues, there was a rich collection of material from which a person could ascertain what was generally considered proper conduct. Just as in Judaism, naturally no mention was made of the cultic duties owed the gods. But there was also silence concerning the homeland and political duties. Of course, here and there, brief instructions about right conduct toward political authorities were transmitted.<sup>10</sup> In general, however, the ethical admonitions concentrated on the type of conduct that was fitting in one's immediate life-situation, namely, in one's dealings with members of the family, slaves and masters. There was no attempt to develop a program to fashion the world according to Christian blueprints. Rather, Christians acknowledged those things which were everywhere adjudged right and reasonable. Remember that Paul had instructed the community: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (ὅσα ἐστὶν ἀληθῆ, ὅσα σεμνά, ὅσα δίκαια, ὅσα ἀγνά, ὅσα προσφιλῆ, ὅσα εὐφημα, εἴ τις ἀρετὴ καὶ εἴ τις ἔπαινος, ταῦτα λογίζεσθε Phil 4:8\*). There is no attempt to change the world and reorganize it on a new basis. Rather, there was sober recognition of the fact that the Christian in his life-situation had to do what could be expected of a human being who tried to act in a morally responsible way. A completely new meaning, however, was given to these instructions, which had been adopted from contemporary culture, for their fulfillment was understood as obedience due to the Kyrios.<sup>11</sup>

In Col 3:18–4:1\*—the oldest Christian "rule for the household"—it is clearly discernible how the ethical teaching was adopted and Christianized. Not only the individual admonitions, but also the reference

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rom 13:1–7\*; 1 Tim 2:2\*; Tit 3:1\*; 1 Pt 2:13–17\*.

\* <sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [Philippians 4:8](#) (NRSV)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese* (Gütersloh: 1961), p. 222: "It is just this subordination within the 'house' (οἶκος) and the fulfillment of the tasks and duties proper to each worldly 'state of life' which is pleasing to the Lord (Col 3:20\*) and corresponds to the 'in-the-Lord'-existence of the Christian (Col 3:18\*). Obedience to the heavenly Lord is shown and takes place, for example, in 'obedience' (ὑπακούειν) to parents or earthly masters (Col 3:20\* and 3:22\*) and therefore within the earthly schemata of authority and subordination."

\* <sup>18</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

<sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

<sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

<sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

<sup>23</sup> Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters,

to what is fitting and generally valid correspond to Hellenistic moral teaching: “as is proper” (ὡς ἀνήκεν 3:18\*); “pleasing” (εὐάρεστον 3:20\*); “justly and fairly” (τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα 4:1\*). The commands, however, are furnished with a completely new motivation through the phrase “in the Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ) and now read: “as is proper in the Lord” (ὡς ἀνήκεν ἐν κυρίῳ 3:18\*); “for this is pleasing in the Lord” (τοῦτο γὰρ εὐάρεστόν ἐστιν ἐν κυρίῳ 3:20\*); the author reminds of the fear of God (3:22\*); conduct is considered as done “for the Lord” (ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ 3:23\*); reference is made to the Lord’s rewarding judgment (3:24f\*; 4:1\*), and the admonition is given: “serve the Lord Christ” (τῷ κυρίῳ Χριστῷ δουλεύετε 3:24\*). It is true that the content of the directives was taken from the cultural environment. The phrase “in the Lord,” however, which introduces the new motivation, is not a mere formal element whose only function is to Christianize the traditional material.<sup>12</sup> Rather the entire life, thought and conduct of believers is subordinated to the lordship of the Kyrios. At the same time the words “in the Lord” set forth a critical principle which makes it possible to determine which ethical admonitions were considered binding for the community. Man’s relationships with his fellow men are the field upon which the

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<sup>24</sup> since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

<sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

<sup>1</sup> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven. [Colossians 3:18–4:1](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>18</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [Colossians 3:18](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. [Colossians 3:20](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>1</sup> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven. [Colossians 4:1](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. [Colossians 3:22](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>23</sup> Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, [Colossians 3:23](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>24</sup> since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

<sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. [Colossians 3:24–25](#) (NRSV)

\* <sup>24</sup> since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. [Colossians 3:24](#) (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> This is the position of Weidinger, *Die Haustafeln*, 51. Cf. against it Schroeder, *Die Haustafeln*, 154f; Schrage, *Einzelgebote*, 202.

Christian proves his obedience to the Lord insofar as he conducts his life in “love” (ἀγάπη).<sup>13</sup> The content of the individual sentences is conditioned by the situations of that time. They do not offer timelessly valid laws, nor do they endow a particular social order with ageless dignity. As times change, so does the general estimation of what is fitting and proper. Christian exhortation, however, must constantly impress on new generations the admonition to be obedient to the Kyrios. How this obedience is to be expressed concretely at any given time, will always have to be tested and determined anew.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eph 5:22–6:9\* speaks of wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves and masters in the same sequence as Col 3:18–4:1\*. To the admonitions, however, it adds a detailed Christological motivation (Eph 5:25–33\*) and a reference to Scripture (Eph 6:2f\*).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Conzelmann, 153: “These rules do not offer a timeless, ‘Christian’ ethics. They presuppose the current social structures and viewpoints. Their validity lies rather in the presuppositions which justified the adoption of these middle class statements. Whoever would want to transport these directives mechanically into today’s social order, would in reality completely alter them both in meaning and content. Moreover, he would grossly misunderstand their theological, namely eschatological basis. This is seen right away in the first admonition, the subordination of wives. This admonition at that time simply meant the observation of an obvious social position, the observation of what was fitting.”