

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Epistle to the Ephesians: Ephesians 5:21-6:9 - Relationships - A Time to Submit

Submission to each other

As the pen has proved mightier than the sword, so love proves to be mightier than force. In Ephesians 5:19-21, we find some of the fruits of being filled with the Spirit. The heart, being filled with gladness, finds a spiritual outlet in song. There is a happy acceptance of all things with thanksgiving to the Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ - even though circumstances may be adverse at the time. Ephesians 5:21 stipulates that our relationships with one another must be marked by the spirit of yieldingness and submission, whilst always maintaining the fear of God (or, as some read, "the fear of Christ"). Our submission to one another must not be at the expense of true subjection to Him. The submission must be geared to His will with the attitudes of lowliness, meekness, long-suffering and the bearing up of one another in love being of primary importance. It is this tender-hearted attitude for which God looks. It results in acts of kindness and forgiveness which are the hallmarks of true Christian fellowship.

From Ephesians 4:17 up until Ephesians 5:21 these exhortations have been applicable **to all believers**. Now we have the specific instructions to wives and husbands, children and fathers, and servants and masters.

The submission of wives

In Ephesians 5:22 the Apostle turns to the wives, saying: "*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord*".

To them the command is comprised in the one word, "Submit". The difficulty about submission is that it requires the surrendering of one's own will. Yet, it is divinely established that the place of subjection is allotted to the wife. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 we find God's order of authority and responsibility - God, Christ, man and then woman. However, the wife's submission is to be voluntary and only to her own husband - not to every man: The woman's place is pictured in the position in which the Church stands to Christ. FB Hole wrote, "Just as Christ is 'Head of the Church', all authority and directing ability and power being vested in Him, so the husband is 'head of the wife.'" (Hole, FB: *Galatians to Philemon* ISBN 9780901860446 [PB] ISBN 97809015860484 [HB], page 60)

The woman is to be conscious of this picture because it will help her to submit to her own husband *as unto the Lord*. This means that submission to her husband must never conflict with the desires of the Lord. How sad it is, then, to see so many Church marriage services where the promise of obedience is omitted from the bride's commitment to the groom. It reflects a general resistance to doing the will of God. We then read: "*For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything*" (Ephesians 5:23-24).

In 1 Peter 3:6, we discover that Sarah called Abraham her lord. "Lordship" demands an **unconditional** surrender in all things. In the marriage relationship, the husband is called the head, not the lord. The wife's submission to her husband is more of a willing and affectionate one.

Unfortunately, with the passage of time, the professing church, that is, one containing real and pretend Christians, has moved far away from its true position. The Church "is subject unto Christ" (Ephesians 5:24), according to the ordering of God; but it has been the very opposite in its actual behaviour. It has acted for itself, and made rules and regulations as though it were the head and not the body. Hence the confusion and many differences found in churches today. In the same way, when the wife, even the Christian wife, sets aside the authority of her own husband, trouble follows.

We may find ourselves asking, "What if the wife has an awkward or incompetent husband?" Only too often this is the case. But the remedy for that is not the rejection of the Divine order. The Church definitely has no such excuse, for it has an absolutely perfect Head - the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not only the church's Head, but He Himself is the Saviour of the body also. The last phrase means that He is continually preserving the Church as a body. As its Head, He is always concerned with its welfare. So it should be with a husband and his wife. However, because the human husband, even the believing one, is not perfect, with succeeding verses, an even longer message is addressed to him. In a word, his duty is

“Love”. It is easy to see that if the husband gives to his wife the love which is her due, she will not have much difficulty in submitting to him, which is his due. The greater responsibility rests with him because love always takes the initiative. The imperfect husband, through this love, would certainly consider the views and opinions of his wife on various matters.

Christ's love for the church

We are then given the *measure* of love that a husband should have for his wife: “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (Ephesians 5:25).

The love which Christ has for the church is reflected in the sacrificial action that He has taken. He has taken the initiative in a most wonderful way. He not only loved the Church, but gave Himself for it. It reminds us of the merchantman seeking goodly pearls who, when he had found one pearl of great price, sold all that He had in order to buy it (Matthew 13:45-46). The church is that goodly pearl in the eyes of Christ. He not only gave up all that He had to buy it, He willingly paid the price with His life. So, *we love Him because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19). This sacrifice of Christ is His *past* work.

Moreover, in Ephesians 5:26-27 we read: “*That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish*”.

The sanctifying and purifying, of which Ephesians 5:26 speaks, is going on **at present** by means of the Word of God. Note that the cleansing here is by water, not by blood. The distinction is an important one because the blood cleanses in a judicial sense. It clears us from guilt in the eyes of God. The water of the Word cleanses us morally. It effects our hearts and, hence, our conduct as Christians. There are some who believe that this is the water which is active in John 3:5 to bring about new birth. Others believe that the word of Christ is on goingly active in the lives of individuals in order to bring them to Christian maturity. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, “*Now ye are clean though the word which I have spoken to you*” (John 15:3). He later said to His Father, “*Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth*” (John 17:17). Whichever the case may be, we know that Christ is using His word to set apart the Church as a *whole* for God on the one hand; and, on the other, to purify it from every taint of sin.

The presentation of the perfected Church will take place in the future glory. It will be Christ's own gift to Himself! What joy will be His at that time! The Church will be His masterpiece. It will be marked by holiness. It will be found without any fault at all. It will be spiritually and morally perfect. This bride will be the object of Christ's love for eternity. Yet, we must always remember the seven steps which led the Church to glory:

(1) Christ loved; (2) He gave Himself; (3) He sanctified it; (4) He cleansed it; and, as verse 29 adds, (5) He nourished it; (6) He cherished it; and, finally, (7) He presents it to Himself.

What a magnificent triumph! It is a process which matches the marriage custom for a Jew.

1. The betrothal - Christ loved. Both are seen to be legally husband and wife.
2. The payment of the dowry - Christ gave Himself.
3. An interval during which the preparations for the wedding and of the bride take place - Christ sanctifies and cleanses.
4. The bride is collected by the groom - Christ comes for her, a thrilling day when the Lord Himself shall descend with an encouraging shout and the Church goes to be with Himself.
5. Both go to the marriage feast or supper - Christ presents her to Himself at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-10).

Let us be mindful of this glorious end especially when discouraged by problems in the present-day Church.

The husband's love for his wife

The Apostle then goes on to describe the way in which men ought to *love* their wives: “*So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church*” (Ephesians 5:28-29)

The picture of Christ and His Church returns to the original idea of one man one wife as indicated in Genesis 2:18-24. This was largely forgotten in Old Testament times with men often taking more than one wife. But as marriage is a figure, in itself, of the relationship between Christ and His Church, then the marriage relationship should follow the same pattern. Consequently, the Christian husband is to love his wife as he loves himself, and the Christian wife is to reverence her husband. Ephesians 5:28-29 show that a man is not to love his wife as a mere possession, but rather as part of himself. Just as a man takes care that no harm comes to his own body, so the husband will, not only protect the wife, but also nourish and cherish her. To “nourish” means to “give food”. It speaks of the husband providing for the health and growth

of his wife. To cherish means “to soften by warmth” which speaks of his tender care for her. The idea is seen in parent birds when they cover their young with their feathers.

It is worth noting that this mystery concerns Christ and the Church. It is the Church seen as one glorious body and not as a local assembly. Furthermore, it is the whole Church as being made up of real Christians. This leads to the thought that we, who constitute the Church, are spoken of as “members of His body.” So the Church is not only seen as the wife or bride, but also as the body of Christ.

This is made yet more plain in God’s original creation of Adam and Eve as Ephesians 5:30-32 show: *“For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church”*.

Now although Eve was Adam’s wife, she was also his body, having been built up from one of his ribs. Adam’s rib has been ridiculed by some professing Christians. Yet here, in the New Testament, the fact concerning it clearly underlies the argument presented. If unbelieving scholars would remove the rib of Adam from Genesis, then they would have to do so in this passage as well. We accept both knowing that the Scriptures are God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16-17), and God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Ephesians 5:33 goes on to conclude the matter: *“Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself, and the wife see that she reverence her husband.”*

Fathers and children

As we open Ephesians 6, we pass from the relationship of husband and wife to that of children and fathers: *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth”* (Ephesians 6:1-3).

The obedience of children

It is good to see that Paul expected children to be attending the Church meetings in those days. Furthermore, he takes time to address them, albeit briefly. This, in itself, is a pattern to be adopted by preachers and teachers today.

Children are ordered to obey their parents. Where the husband and wife have fostered an atmosphere of love and respect for one another, any offspring entering into that family environment would find it easier to obey. The child would gladly honour his parents. That is, he or she would greatly value them and respond to them in a way which would be a continual blessing to them. However, it is not only this return of love which is to bring about honour and obedience to both parents; it is, rather, a desire to please the Lord. Therefore, we can see that the Apostle is primarily addressing Christian children.

Some research has indicated that most conversions occur between the ages of about 8 to 14 years. If you are a Christian child, then you have the example of Jesus as a boy to follow. At the age of twelve, He was concerned with His Father’s business. This means He did the work of God His Father. He was also subject to His mother and stepfather (see Luke 2:49-51) even though He was the Son of God.

Honouring parents is a command of “first” or “foremost” importance to God. Accompanying it is a general promise of well-being and a long physical life. Where Christian parents are faithful, then the children are trained to be well disciplined. This will be reflected in their lifestyles. Unfortunately, today, more and more children are becoming rebellious. It is one of the signs of the times. They disregard their parents’ advice and find themselves living recklessly. Drugs, alcohol, promiscuity become the daily habit and take their toll on the body and the mind. The general result is both a poor quality of life and a short-lived one. Yet, it is clear that Christian fathers have a particularly important role in this.

The responsibilities of fathers

The Apostle writes: *“And, ye fathers provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4)

This is a challenge to any Christian father. “To bring up” means to “nourish”. As we saw previously, it is to “promote health and growth”. To “nurture” means to “discipline or correct”, while an “admonition” is a warning. How carefully these things should be administered by the father. It is so easy for the father to act in such a severe and unjust way that his child becomes angry. In the Christian family, clashes of personality are to be avoided, and the father’s discipline is to be fair and firm, yet exercised in love. In Hebrews 12:5-11, we see how God disciplines or chastens those who belong to Him. The passage shows us that if a child is really loved, then he will be reproved. If it becomes necessary, God will even “scourge” (through circumstances) every son whom He receives. God always chastens in order to correct our wrong behaviour and to promote right behaviour. He does not discipline us to relieve His own anger, as an earthly father might.

Masters and Slaves

The Apostle then turns his attention to the relationship between the master and his bondservants.

The obedience of slaves

The bondservant is encouraged first: *“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ, not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free”* (Ephesians 6:5-8)

A bondservant is one who is owned by his master. Once converted, a slave was to bring glory to God by being honest and good in the sight of his master (see Titus 2:10). Yet, being conscious of his own weaknesses, he was encouraged to do this both with fear and trembling and in sincerity of heart as if it were to Christ. In this way, slavery could be abolished from within. How would you think a master would treat a slave who served him wholeheartedly and honestly? Why, he would respect him - even love him. Furthermore, the servant was not to be generally idle and, when aware of a coming inspection, suddenly turn on the “work mode” in order to please the inspectors! The slave was to be a faithful worker and so please, not only his master, but God.

The Apostle then states that it is the nature of the deed of **any** man (slave or free) that determines his reward from the Lord Himself. Both the motivation behind the work and the **manner** in which it is carried out are examined under the eye of Christ. When the Christian stands before the judgment seat of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:9-11), his service for the Lord will be examined. That which has been done for the wrong motives and in the wrong manner will be burned away. That which has been done to the glory of God will receive its reward.

The respect to be shown by masters

If we apply this to secular employment, then let us be careful how we serve the Lord, whether we are employees or, as we shall now see, employers. *“And, ye masters, do the same things unto them forbearing threatening; knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with Him”* (Ephesians 6:9).

These words show that loyalty is not to be one-sided. If the interests of the masters are to be promoted by the slaves, then the welfare of the slaves is to be promoted by the masters. So, the masters are not to threaten their slaves, remembering that they have a Master in heaven. In other words, the Christian slave served with goodwill as to the Lord; while the Christian master was to realise he also had responsibilities, as a slave, to the same Master in heaven.

Today

Today, we can see the whole fabric of society being torn apart because people are turning away from God and His Word. (Politicians may give many reasons for such a trend, rather than submit to this fundamental one). For example, the marriage bond is lightly regarded; separation and divorce, being made easy, are increasing alarmingly; the more radical demands for so-called “women’s rights” have tended to scorn the thought of headship and subjection; obedience and honour to parents are far rarer, with many parents being unable to control their children and true discipline being despised by many; and the greed of men and women is destroying the relationship between servant and master, between employer and employee. We, Christians, should fly our colours from mast to mast by obeying the instructions given to us in this chapter. What a colourful splash of testimony this would be in the dark sea of a nation that can only fly the letters “NC” meaning “I am in distress and require immediate assistance.” Such is the condition of those who have turned away from the will of God.

A prayer:

Gracious God our Father, thank You for the wonder of Your love shown to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You too for the love of our Lord Jesus who guarantees that His Church will be with Himself, in glory, for evermore. Such love, O God, demands that we give our lives and service over to You. We therefore ask that You will give us the grace to behave in a way which pleases You, whether it be in the role of husband or wife, child or father, servant or master - in order that the name of Christ be increasingly honoured in this failing nation. Amen.

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