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WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "SUBMIT"?

Ephesians 5:21-24

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A few years ago a Russian newspaper reported a light-hearted poll of 100 Soviet households. In 90 of the homes, the wife described herself as the head of the family--and the husband agreed. In nine families the husband said he was boss, but the wife disagreed. The only husband whose wife named him as head of the family was told by the newspaper that he had won an award. When asked to select his prize, he turned to his wife and asked: "What shall I choose, Maria?"

Over the past 30 years, the women's movement has changed the way people think about roles in marriage. Everything is up for grabs. Women want to juggle careers and families. They want all gender-based distinctions eliminated, both in the workplace and at home. Everything is to be egalitarian. And such views have invaded even the evangelical church. Many argue that women should be able to do everything in the church that men can do, including pastoring or serving as elders. In the home, there should not be any hierarchy of authority but, rather, mutual submission. Passages which enjoin wives to submit to their husbands are either explained as applying only to that culture or are reinterpreted in light of a few other Scriptures so that they don't mean what they seem to say.

We cannot study what the New Testament says about Christian marriage without considering what it says about the respective roles of husbands and wives. Since in the context of Ephesians 5, Paul addresses the wives first, that's the order we will follow. But it means that if a husband is here today, he has to come back next week to hear what the Bible says to him! Men, this is one of the few Sundays that I don't care if you tune me out and think about football! Seriously, it is significant that the Bible never says, "Husbands, get your wives to submit to you." That is not your responsibility, men! It never commands the husband to be the head of his household. Rather, it states it as a fact in the course of discussing the wife's role. What God's Word says to the wife is her responsi-

bility. As with all biblical commands, she and her family will be blessed if she obeys or disciplined by God if she disobeys.

As Christians, we accept the Bible as authoritative. As Americans, we tend to be opposed to the concept of authority. Our nation was founded on a rebellion, and one of our early flags defiantly proclaims, "Don't tread on me!" But God doesn't cater to our rebellious spirit. He gives commandments, not helpful hints. God's ways are opposed to our human ways (Isa. 55:8). As a general rule, you can figure that if the world is going after something, it is probably opposed to what Scripture commands. God's Word is strongly against the world's way of men dominating and suppressing women; but, also, it is against the world's way of denying any gender-based authority in the church and home. It is abundantly clear that the things Paul commands are not culturally determined. His commands about the roles of husband and wife are based on the relationship between Christ and the church, which does not change.

If we want God's blessing (and all His commandments are designed for the good of both men and women), then we must deliberately cast off the world's ways--both of domineering men and of feminist thinking--and seek to understand and obey His clear commandments, however odd they may seem to our culture. So my approach is to seek to explain and apply what Scripture teaches. In our text, Paul says,

God's command to wives is that they submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ.

First we must understand that ...

1. There is a sense in which all believers must submit to one another (5:21).

The Greek word used is a military term meaning to put oneself in rank under another person. It implies taking on the mind-set of a servant, where instead of expecting others to cater to you and your needs, you look out for and seek to meet their needs. We need to keep several things in mind concerning verse 21:

MUTUAL SUBMISSION DOES NOT MEAN:

(1)... *that there is no authority in the church or home.* Paul himself is included in the command of verse 21, and yet he goes on as an apostle to give explicit commands involving submission to wives, children, and slaves. If you take verse 21 to the ridiculous lengths that the feminists take it, two Christians could never get through a door at the same time. The first would say, "You go first." The other would say, "No, after you." "But I must submit to you." "No, I must submit to you."

(2)... *being a doormat or compromising on matters of truth or biblical principle.* The apostle who wrote verse 21 is the same man who publicly confronted none other than the apostle Peter about his hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14). Being submissive does not mean being a weak, Caspar Milquetoast type person.

MUTUAL SUBMISSION DOES MEAN:

(1) ... *adopting a servant lifestyle and attitude.* Believers are to follow the Lord Jesus who, although He was Lord and Teacher, laid aside His rights, took a towel and basin, and performed the lowly servant's task of washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). He said, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (John 13:14-15). Being submissive as Jesus was does not mean abandoning God-given authority (He still is Lord), but rather getting our focus off ourselves and onto pleasing God and serving others for His sake.

(2) ... *being at rest.* A submissive person is not "kicking against the goads," as Paul was before his conversion. A submissive person isn't fighting for his or her rights, demanding equal treatment. The fight is over when you submit. A submissive person trusts God to meet his or her needs. He or she doesn't have anything to prove.

(3)... *growing in godly character qualities.* A submissive person is not cantankerous, assertive, pushy, self-willed, and difficult to get along with. Believers are to be growing in humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love (Eph. 4:2). Our lives are to be under the control of the Holy Spirit, who produces joy and thankfulness (Eph. 5:18-20). Both those in positions of authority (in the church and home) and those under authority are to be marked by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). This puts a check on authoritarian, self-

serving, insensitive leadership. But verse 21 does not do away with the biblical concept of authority and leadership. Thus,

2. There is a further sense in which wives must submit to husbands, but not husbands to wives (5:22-24).

With regard to marriage, the submission of the wife is taught also in Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:5, and 1 Peter 3:1-6. It is behind the requirement that an elder be a good manager of his household (1 Tim. 3:4; the Greek word for manager is literally, "one who stands before"). It is implicit in the order of creation and in the purpose for which woman was created (for the man, not vice versa--1 Cor. 11:9), thus applying even before the fall. The rule of the husband over the wife was specifically mandated in the curse on the woman (Gen. 3:16) because she had rebelled not only against God's rule, but also against her husband, when she listened to the serpent. Submission is more difficult under the curse than before, because the husband is now a fallen, self-centered sinner by nature. But it is not nullified in Christ.

Paul makes three points about the submission of wives to their husbands in these verses:

- A. The submission of wives to their husbands stems from the wife's submission to Christ (5:22).

God has ordained an order for the church and the home in which male and female are to reflect His image (Gen. 1:28). Part of the image of God involves the voluntary submission of the Son to the Father. Though equal in His deity, the Son yields Himself to the Father's plan. As Jesus explained, "I can do nothing on My own initiative.... I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30). Jesus submitted even to the cross.

Thus God's plan is that in the home (and also in the church), women, who are equal persons with men before God, are willingly to submit themselves to male leadership for the carrying out of the divine plan. The main reason a wife should submit to her husband's leadership in the home is to please and obey God. If you challenge or undermine your husband's leadership, you are resisting the lordship of Christ in your life according to verse 22.

- B. The submission of wives to their husbands is because the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church (5:23).

Some feminists go to great lengths to try to argue that the Greek word for "head" means "source" and carries no notion of authority. This is ludicrous. While it is true that Adam was the source of Eve (since God created her from him), in what sense is every other husband the source of his wife? In Ephesians 1:21-23, it is obvious that Paul isn't talking about Christ's headship in the sense that He is the source of the church (there is no such idea in the context), but rather that He is the supreme authority over the church ("rule, authority, power, and dominion," 1:21; "subjection under His feet," 1:22; "head over all things," 1:22).

Also, in the analogy of head and body, your head is not the source of your body, but rather the part of your body that controls and directs the rest. If your head commands your arm to move and your arm doesn't respond, your body isn't functioning properly. Furthermore, authority is inherent in the command to be subject, which means to put yourself in rank under another. It is nonsensical to say, "Be subject to your source."

Resisting God's authority and wanting to put himself on an equal (not higher, but equal) plane with God was Satan's original sin: "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:15). When God put man and woman in the garden to reflect His image, He put the man over the woman, as implied by the order (1 Cor. 11:9) and purpose (to be a helper for him--helpers aren't over the ones they help, except in the case of God) of her creation.

It was not by accident or coincidence that Satan tempted the woman rather than the man. Satan's appeal to her was that she could become like God by eating the fruit. That was a lie! She was most like God when she was subject to her husband, thus reflecting God's image. When she sinned and then got Adam to sin, the roles were reversed. Man as male and female were no longer reflecting God's image on earth. But what was lost in the fall is regained by the new man, which is Christ and the church, as we assume our proper roles as male and female under the headship of Christ in the church and home.

Again, the headship of the husband is not commanded, but stated as a fact, because it is the divine arrangement. We as husbands may not be living up to the fact, but we are still held accountable before God as head over our wives. What does it mean? (Husbands need to listen at this point!)

First, headship implies accountability and responsibility. Your head is responsible for what your body does. If a person does something stupid and gets hurt, we don't blame his body, as if it did something apart from him. We blame him, and we question whether he acted wisely, which is to question his head! If you are the head of a department at work, and the department doesn't complete its assignment properly, you're the guy they go after. The head is accountable and responsible for those under his charge.

Spiritually in the family that means that God holds the husband primarily accountable for what happens. This doesn't mean that a wife should be totally passive if her husband is being irresponsible, but it does mean that come judgment day, men, you can't blame your wife for the lack of spiritual direction in your home! You're it! As men, we need to take the initiative in the family to read the Bible, to pray, to be involved in the church and in serving the Lord, and to train our children in the things of God.

Second, headship implies seeking the well-being of the body. In your physical body, your head is not out to hurt or abuse the members of your body so that your head can profit, but to protect and nurture your body. If your body suffers, your head suffers. Concerning Christ's headship of the church, Paul states, "He Himself being the Savior of the body." Of course the role of Savior is unique to the One who shed His blood for our remission of sins.

But there is a principle that applies to every position of authority, namely, that God never grants authority so that the one in authority can serve himself at the expense of those under his authority. God gives authority for the protection and well-being of those under that authority. If a man abuses his authority over his family by serving himself rather than by building up his family in the Lord, he will answer to God! Even as Christ the Head gave Himself for the salvation of His bride, the church, so husbands are to give themselves in love for their wives.

Thus Paul says: The submission of wives to their husbands stems from the wife's submission to Christ (5:22); her submission is because the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church (5:23). Also,

- C. The submission of wives to their husbands is to model the submission of the church to Christ (5:24).

I've already touched on this as a part of God's design for marriage in the original creation. But on a practical level, the sweet spirit of submission which a wife should display toward Christ and toward her husband, and the tender, up-building love which the husband has for his wife, should model to the world the relationship between believers and their loving Lord. The world operates on the principle of self. In a worldly marriage, each partner is in an ongoing struggle of power and manipulation to seek to get his or her way. Sometimes worldly couples succeed in establishing a mutually satisfying relationship where they agree to meet in the middle and the marriage holds together. But often they wound each other in the struggle and end up divorcing because their selfish needs aren't being met.

But Christian marriages should be radically different from worldly marriages. In a Christian marriage, rather than competing with the husband or trying to manipulate him to get her way, the wife willingly submits to him, seeking to build him in the Lord and to do all she can to please him. The husband--rather than bullying his wife or, as often happens, passively letting her have her way so that he can buy himself some peace--the Christian husband provides loving leadership, sacrificially giving himself to build and nurture his wife in the Lord.

The point is, the world ought to look at the way a Christian couple relates to one another, recognize the unique beauty of this kind of marriage, and say, "I want that for myself." That's when we tell them, "The way you get it is by repenting of your selfishness and sin, trusting in Christ as your Savior, and submitting to Him daily as your Lord."

Conclusion

The issue of authority and submission in marriage should not come up very often. A loving, sensitive husband will not force his

wife to do anything against God's will, and he will not push her into anything distasteful or harmful to her. He will never assert his authority to get his own way. When there are disagreements, they should be worked through calmly in love. In making decisions, a wise husband will solicit and carefully weigh his wife's insights, so that most decisions will be mutually agreed on. I heard of one husband in ministry who came home and announced to his wife that they were going to move across the country. In my opinion, that was a dumb, insensitive abuse of authority.

Only rarely, and after much communication and prayer, should a husband need to exercise his authority against his wife's point-of-view. If and when that happens, he needs to do it with fear and trembling before God, recognizing that he will be held accountable by God for his decision. At all times he should have God's glory and his wife's spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being as his goal.

Of course, submission is easier, wives, when your husband is loving and gentle, and when you agree with him. It's not easy when he is not being godly or when you disagree with him. You should never obey your husband if it means disobeying a clear command of God. But even then, you can display a submissive attitude ("a gentle and quiet spirit," 1 Pet. 3:4) and appeal to him out of love and respect. Your goal should be always to glorify God and to build your husband.

The things I've spoken on today run cross-grain not only to the attitudes of our culture, but often to the attitudes of those in the church. If God's Spirit has convicted you as a husband or wife of sin toward your mate, His remedy is confession, both to Him and to the one you've wronged. Thank God, He allows U-turns! Check your attitude: If you're fighting inside, you're not submitting. If you're not submitting, the world can't see Christ in your marriage.

Discussion Questions

1. Does submission mean that the husband makes all the decisions? Does headship mean that he should never yield to his wife?
2. Does submission imply inferiority? Why/why not?
3. Are specific tasks in marriage gender-related (housework, providing financially, etc.)? Base your answer on Scripture.
4. Should a wife submit without comment when she knows her husband is making a stupid mistake?

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