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SUBMITTING TO ONE ANOTHER

Ephesians 5:21

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Ephesians Lesson 47

Submitting to One Another Ephesians 5:21

We come to a topic of vital importance, in that it affects our relationships in the home, at church, and on the job. Yet it is a topic that generates a lot of friction and heat, because the biblical viewpoint is about as diametrically opposed to that of the world as it could be. If you want to follow God and His Word on this subject, you must consciously throw off the worldly mindset and decisively submit to what God's Word plainly states.

Our subject is submission, first in a general statement and then applied specifically to marriage, the family, and the workplace. Ephesians 5:21, translated literally, is, "submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ." It is the last of five participles that spell out the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The first three center on joyful worship (5:19). The fourth is, "always giving thanks for all things" (5:20). Now the last relates to our relationships, "submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ." It also serves as a topic phrase to introduce Paul's teaching on Christian marriage (5:22-33); instruction to children and parents (6:1-4); and directions to slaves and masters (6:5-9).

I'll warn you, if you don't like what the Bible states, you can find purportedly Christian authors who try to explain the text in line with the world's thinking. The world encourages everyone to stand up for his or her rights. The feminist movement promotes women's rights. The homosexual movement promotes so-called "gay" rights (they ruined a perfectly good word that used to mean, happy). Some advocate children's rights to be free from parental authority (although they never seem to extend those rights to children who still happen to be in the womb). PETA promotes animal rights, often over and above human rights. If you think that your rights have been violated, you can easily find a lawyer who will take your case to court. You may win a ridiculously huge settlement!

So the world's way is, "Assert yourself! Stand up for your rights! You don't have to take such treatment! Get an attorney to fight for your rights!" God's way is, "submit to one another in the

fear of Christ." These views are at polar opposites! But, as I said, you can find those claiming to be Christians who try to bend the Bible to fit the world. But as God's people, we must submit ourselves to His Word as our *only* authority, so that we are not conformed to this evil world.

I need to begin by explaining three different interpretations of our text. The first is unacceptable for the reasons just stated. The other two are difficult to decide between. The first view is that of so-called evangelical feminism, which takes Ephesians 5:21 as an overarching, controlling principle of mutual submission that abolishes any hierarchical distinctions based on gender in the church or home. They would also appeal to Galatians 3:28, where Paul states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." These verses, it is claimed, do away with any gender-based roles in marriage or in church leadership.

Books have been written to refute this (one of the best is, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Crossway], edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem). But in brief, it seems that the following verses (Eph. 5:22-24) decisively show that Paul was not abolishing gender-based roles. Also, there are many other verses that stipulate male leadership in the home and in the church (1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-10; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). In my judgment, the very fact that this feminist view did not emerge in church history until the feminist movement emerged in the world, makes it suspect. It is a case of the church conforming to the world, rather than standing opposed to the world.

A second view is that verse 21 does not refer to the mutual submission of everyone in the church. Rather it refers to wives submitting to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters, as spelled out in the following verses. (Peter O'Brien argues cogently for this, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 401-405; also, Piper and Grudem, pp. 493-494.)

The main argument for this view is that the semantic meaning of the Greek word for "submit" almost exclusively refers to someone subjecting himself or herself to another who is in authority over that person. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to Jesus' submission to His parents (Luke 2:51); of demons

being subject to the apostles (Luke 10:17, 20); of citizens being subject to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13); of the universe being subject to Christ (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22); of unseen powers being subject to Christ (1 Pet. 3:22); of Christ being subject to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:28); of church members being subject to their leaders (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Pet. 5:5); of wives being subject to their husbands (Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:5; Eph. 5:22, 24); of the church being subject to Christ (Eph. 5:24); of servants being subject to their masters (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18); and of Christians being subject to God (Heb. 12:9; James 4:7; Piper & Grudem, p. 493). It is significant that none of these relationships are ever reversed. Piper & Grudem state, "The word is never 'mutual' in its force; it is *always one-directional* in its reference to submission to an authority" (*ibid.*, italics theirs).

The main argument against this view is the term, "one another," which seems to refer to mutual submission. But, those who hold this view counter that that term is not always used to refer to exclusively mutual relationships. For example, Revelation 6:4 says, "that men would slay one another." Obviously, it does not mean that everyone mutually kills everyone, but rather that some would kill others. Or, Galatians 6:2, which commands us to bear one another's burdens does not mean that we mutually exchange burdens, but rather that some who are more able should bear the burdens of those who are less able. In 1 Corinthians 11:33, where Paul tells the church to wait for one another before partaking of the Lord's Supper, it means that those who are ready early should wait for others who are late. So, in Ephesians 5:21, it is argued, "be subject to one another" could be paraphrased, "those who are under authority should be subject to others among you who have authority over them" (*ibid.*, p. 494).

While this view is very compelling and may be correct, I am still inclined to the third view, which is that there is a sense of mutual submission in biblical relationships in which we lay aside our rights and humbly serve one another in love. This is the view of most commentators. It does not do away with the concept of hierarchical authority in the various God-ordained spheres (as the first view does). But it argues that there is a sense in which even those in positions of authority should submit to those under their authority by not being self-assertive, but by serving in love. Jesus

was in authority over the disciples, but He laid aside His rights and washed their feet. He taught them (Mark 10:42-44), "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all."

So, while husbands do not abdicate authority over their wives, they should lay aside all selfishness and authoritarian dominance. Instead, they obey our text by laying down their lives for their wives as they selflessly seek their wives' highest good (Eph. 5:25-29). There is a sense in which even parents are to be subject to their own children, as they serve them in love. As John Calvin argues (*John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians* [Banner of Truth], p. 561), when a husband lovingly bears the burdens of his wife, is that not subjection? When a father lovingly gives himself for his children, there is subjection. When we assist one another, it is servitude or subjection. Thus there would seem to be a sense in which we all are mutually to submit to one another, without abandoning our roles of God-given authority. Thus, in our text Paul is saying,

Filled with the Spirit, believers' relationships should be
marked by joyful submission to one another
out of the fear of Christ.

1. Being filled with the Spirit is the foundation for proper submission to one another.

I am basing this on the grammatical connection between verses 18 and 21. Verse 21 is the result of verse 18. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means to be under the Spirit's control. To the extent that you are not controlled by the Holy Spirit, you are controlling your own life. So, every Spirit-filled Christian is a submissive Christian. You have submitted your life to the control of the Spirit. Since God has ordained certain spheres of authority in which we are to submit, if we are submissive to the Holy Spirit, we will be submissive to these God-ordained authorities.

2. God has ordained authority and submission in various spheres to accomplish His purposes and for our blessing and protection.

We recognize this in any human endeavor that requires the involvement of many people. To build a house, someone has to be in charge in order to coordinate the project. The contractor follows a plan. He organizes and brings in various subcontractors at the appropriate times to move the project along. These subcontractors may have a team of workers under their supervision. The workers have to submit to the direction of their boss, who submits to the overall direction of the contractor. If anyone veers from the plan and direction of the contractor, the progress on the house will be stalled or set back. I could illustrate the same principle by an army or a government or any other joint endeavor. Authority and submission are required to accomplish the purposes of the organization. When everyone does what they are supposed to do, it is for the overall good of those under authority.

Note five things about God-ordained authority:

A. Even in the Trinity, there is an eternal hierarchy of authority and submission.

Although the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all equally God in every respect, to carry out the divine plan for the ages, the Son submits to the Father and the Spirit submits to the Father and to the Son (1 Cor. 15:28; John 14:26; 16:13-14). Yet there is no rivalry or jealousy among the members of the Trinity, but rather perfect love and harmony (see Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit* [Crossway], especially chapter 6, "Beholding the Wonder of the Triune Persons in Relational Community"). As Ware points out (p. 137), "The most marked characteristic of the trinitarian relationship is the presence of an eternal and inherent expression of authority and submission." Thus, "*Both authority and submission are good, for both are expressive of God himself*" (italics his). Further, "one of the lessons of the Trinity is that God loves what we despise; namely, God loves, exercises, and embraces rightful authority-submission relationships" (*ibid.*).

B. God has ordained and instituted all authority.

Romans 13:1 states, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." In Luke 4:6, Satan tells Jesus that he has been given the authority to hand over

all the kingdoms of the world to whomever he wishes, and Jesus did not dispute the point. While sometimes we must resist evil government authority in obedience to God (Acts 4:19; 5:29), we need to recognize that He has ordained such authority.

C. God has ordained authority for four reasons:

(1) God has ordained authority to accomplish His purposes.

As I explained, authority and accountability are necessary to accomplish any purpose through a group, whether it is to build a house or to run a company, an army, or a country. While in a fallen world, those in authority often abuse their position, it does not negate the necessity for proper authority. Those in authority also incur responsibility and accountability to God. To whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48).

(2) God has ordained authority to protect and bless those under authority.

Good human government protects and blesses the citizens who are under that government. Bad government exposes everyone to danger and corruption, as you know if you've traveled to a country that has a corrupt government! Good family government protects and blesses the family. Good church government enables the members to grow and thrive in the Lord.

(3) God has ordained authority to develop godly character in those who submit.

Children grow to maturity as they submit to their parents, as illustrated even with Jesus (Luke 2:51-52). Wives become holy and blameless as they submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:24, 27). Church members grow as they submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-14). As Christian citizens, we grow in godliness as we submit to our government, in that submission itself is a trait of God as trinitarian. Even when an authority is unjust or ungodly, when we submit, we grow to be more like Jesus, who suffered unjustly for our sins (1 Pet. 2:18-23; 3:12-19). While there is a proper time and way to resist ungodly authority, we must be careful in how we do it (see Dan. 1:8-21).

- (4) God has ordained authority to help us receive wisdom for life's decisions.

Jesus said (John 6:38), "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." He often slipped away for prayer and through that means He knew what the Father wanted Him to do (see Mark 1:35-39). As we submit to God's Word and seek the wisdom and counsel of those who are in authority over us (e.g., parents, church leaders), we can gain His wisdom for the important decisions in our lives.

To review, even in the Trinity there is an eternal hierarchy of authority and submission. God has instituted all human authority for four reasons: to accomplish His purposes; to protect and bless those under authority; to develop godly character in those who submit; and, to help us receive wisdom for life's decisions. Thus,

- D. To resist God-given authority means to thwart God's purpose and protection in our lives.

Whoever resists authority removes himself from that protection and exposes himself to harm and punishment (Rom. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:15). Rebellion against God-given authority is a serious sin (see 1 Sam. 15:23)!

Satan fell because he wanted to put himself on an equal plane of authority with God. This was the basis of his temptation to Eve, to eat of the fruit so that she would be like God (Gen. 3:5). He got her to resist Adam's authority, because the command not to eat the fruit came to Eve through Adam (Gen. 2:16-17, 18ff.). Satan's appeal was, "You don't have to obey God or your husband. Make your own decisions! Be your own authority!" That has been his appeal to all fallen human beings ever since. It is safe to say that all defiance against God-given authority originates from Satan and puts those who resist authority in opposition to God Himself.

- E. God has ordained authority in six areas:

I've already mentioned these, so I'm summarizing here. First, there is *submission to God*, who is the Sovereign of the universe (James 4:7). The fact that Jesus Christ is Lord means that He is God, which is why we should fear Him (as our text states). Second, there is *submission to government leaders* (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). Third, there is *submission to church leaders* (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5; 1

Cor. 16:15-16). Fourth, there is *submission of wives to husbands and of children to their parents* (Eph. 5:22-6:4). Fifth, there is the *submission of workers to employers* (slaves to masters, Eph. 6:5-9). Sixth, there is *mutual submission in the body of Christ* (Eph. 5:21).

As I said, some strong expositors reject this last category, but there are also many that accept it. If there is a legitimate sense in which we are to submit to one another, it does not negate the other God-given areas of authority. Rather, it means that we are to set aside all self-seeking and selfish assertiveness and rather, humbly serve one another in love.

The supreme example is our Lord Jesus, who in the very context of washing the disciples' feet made it clear that He was still the Lord and Teacher (John 13:13-15). He did not relinquish His authority when He submitted Himself to serve others. Rather, He did not demand His rights or lead by dominating others. He lived a life of sacrificial obedience to the Father, giving Himself on the cross to secure our redemption (Phil. 2:5-8). Even so, we are to follow His example (Phil. 2:3-4), "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Why should we submit in this way to one another?

3. The motive for submitting ourselves to one another is that we fear Christ.

Paul says that we are to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." This is not the cringing fear of judgment, but rather the reverential fear that acknowledges Christ's supremacy as Lord of the universe. It is the awe of knowing that God has put all things in subjection under Christ's feet (Eph. 1:22), so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). It is also the fear of grieving or disappointing the One who loved us and gave Himself for us (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit* [Baker], pp. 77-78).

Our fallen human nature is not inclined toward submission. Even as believers, we have a strong propensity to resist authority. So we must first and foremost bow before Jesus as our Lord.

When we fear Him, then we can more easily submit to the various spheres of human authority that He has ordained for our good.

The test of whether we are truly subject to God-ordained authority is whether we can submit *joyfully*. Grudging submission is perhaps better than no submission at all, but *joyful* submission shows that we are truly subject to God. Verse 21 is a continuation of the results of being filled with the Spirit, which include joyful singing and heartfelt thanks. You can't divorce submission from these two preceding verses. Submission can be joyful, because we know that God has our good in view and that submission to proper human authority is ultimately submission to the Lord Himself (Eph. 5:22, 24; Rom. 13:2).

Also, when those in authority live in the fear of Christ, they will not abuse their authority. They will exercise authority in love and out of a desire to seek the highest good of those under authority. They know that one day they will give an account to the Judge of all (Heb. 13:17). So they view leadership not as an opportunity for personal advantage, but as a solemn responsibility to be exercised in the fear of Christ.

Conclusion

Let me ask a hard question: Are you a submissive person? Most importantly, are you submitting daily to Jesus as Lord of everything in your life? Are you subject to the government in obedience to Christ? Are you submitting to a local church and its leadership? As a wife, are you submitting to your husband (more on this next week!)? Children, are you subject to your parents? Workers, are you subject to your employer? And, for all of us, are you submitting yourself to others in selfless service for Christ's sake? Do you look for needs in others and seek to minister to those needs? If you are filled with the Spirit, your relationships should be marked by joyful submission to others out of the fear of Christ.

Application Questions

1. Does the command, "submit," make you feel joyful or angry? Why? How should it make you feel?
2. How can Christians know if or when they should not submit to unjust or corrupt authority? What guidelines apply?
3. When those in authority are not protecting or blessing those under authority, what recourse is there? Is it wrong to seek to correct the abusive situation? Give Scriptural support.
4. How does a person rightfully submit without becoming a doormat? When is it right to say "no" to serving others?

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