

EPHESIANS

blessed to be a blessing

WEEK NINE

Ephesians 5.21-33 (wives), Part I

This instruction to wives sounds outdated. Or maybe the real intended message has gotten so twisted from its original form that it can hardly be discerned. Patriarchal marriages were in fact the norm in Greco-Roman and Hellenistic Judaic cultures (read: ancient) as a way to maintain order in the marriage and society as a whole. But in the 21st Century? Come on, people! Even saying the “s” word seems vile to some wives because of the ill-health of the marriage or because it has suffered more cultural abuse in this broken world than any other word in the Bible. As much as believing wives may wish to dump this teaching because of its associated misperceptions, it is part of the biblical canon that we believe was inspired by God, so it too must be grappled with. Let’s make some sense of it and get back to what is intended in this teaching.

We cannot be tempted to read these passages legalistically, so it might be helpful to start with what submission is *not*. Of course submission is not a blind, bitter, or forced compliance, a mindless “yes dear” kind of mentality, acquiescing to evil or abuse at the hands of a husband, or a loveless authoritarian structure. None of these in no uncertain terms is what is intended. These are all signs that the message has been badly misinterpreted, not to mention the human rights violation, which goes completely against Christ’s high value of every human life.

This passage is also not teaching superiority and inferiority complexes. There is nothing in the husband that makes him “better” than the woman that he should be appointed head except that God ordained it this way for mutual benefit that extends beyond anything we can perceive. Likewise, there is nothing in the wife that makes her “lesser” than the husband that she would be given this responsibility. The concept is not about status as a social construct at all.

Let us absorb these truths before we move on to more. Allow God to reverse any ideas of status about men and women that may be culturally ingrained in you and that go against God’s view of humanity. Imagine God whispering these words to you: *Daughter, my love for you is extravagant. I have joined you and your husband in holy union under my power and authority and omniscience. I have your, and your family’s, best interest at heart when I ask you to willingly yield to your husband’s overall authority in your household. Let me show you and others the greater love and harmony available through my divine plan. Keep asking for what you need. Trust. I love you.*

Ephesians 5.21-33 (wives), Part II

The writer casts the submission of wives to husbands onto the larger picture of her relationship to the Lord. Knowing that Christ is fully connected to and submitted to the Father, that Christ has overflowing love for her and only her best interest in mind, and her deep love and reverence for Him, these all provide the motivation for her to yield her will to Christ’s. Christ’s leadership can be fully trusted and is a lifeline for her because He is the faithful King of Eternity and the All-Knowing God. Often times it will be a difficult task that He is calling her to, but willingly surrendering to God’s will creates more harmony and abundance in her life and significantly deepens the intimacy in this relationship.

This deep reverence, love, and commitment that believing wives have for Christ form the basis for their submission to their husbands (the ‘why’). The likeness of the Church submitting to Christ is a beautiful picture, and it demonstrates how wives are to view their submission to their husbands (the ‘how’). The Church is one with Christ because it is His body. There is a special, divine order in this relationship which is established for a grander purpose. Likewise, with the husband and wife, there is a divine order which has been established, and there is a greater good at stake here when this order is surrendered to. Mutual submission is taught as a rhythm to be highly valued, but there are times when two heads make a monster, and the proper response of the wife is to willingly submit to her husband’s authority.

Pray that the Holy Spirit would fill you with the proper perspective and power needed to willingly yield to your husband’s loving headship. This requires a strength which many do not possess, yet God is ready to give wives the wisdom to recognize the husband’s authority, the strength and peace to willingly submit to this divinely appointed authority, and the proper attitude of reverence towards the husband. Wives, pray often for this perspective and strength, and if your husband’s life does not seem to align with Christ, pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will give him just what he needs to get back on track. Yes, pray fervently and constantly until this first order is restored! In the meantime, it could just be God working through your Christlike behavior that draws him back to the Lord (1 Peter 3.1-6).

Ephesians 6.1-4

Think about how a fruit tree is raised to maturity. Investment in its proper care and nurturing is the dutiful requirement of the tender. If a branch begins to show signs of withering or going off the path of vitality, one does not physically or verbally scold it but would attempt to gently correct it. One would make sure it has the right environment with all the necessary ingredients to allow it to flourish.

The author of this letter is writing to people who live in a culture where the father had the legal right to do anything he wanted to his children (Greco-Roman) or where strict punishment was legislated (Hellenistic Judaism). He is radically overturning these notions and placing a father’s power and authority in the context of mutual submission (5.21) and submission to Christ. The word used in verse 4 for “*bring them up*” means to feed, raise, or nourish children to maturity with tender care.”¹ It is the same word used in Ephesians 5.29, which is translated “*he feeds and cares for it*,” speaking of a person’s own body. This does not imply that we give children everything they want, but we are to ensure that children are raised in the right nurturing environment with much love and discipline that are pleasing to the Lord.

There are different levels of correction, beginning with the upmost tender verbal encouragement. If this isn’t helping to correct the situation after much use, then other forms of Christlike encouragement can be used. There are emotional, physical, and psychological boundaries that can be easily crossed if one is not careful, and these boundaries are probably closer than we think. Infuriating a child, which causes resentment and strife, is never to be a father’s recourse. It is worth quoting some particulars:

“...avoiding attitudes, words, and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation or resentment and thus rules out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child’s needs and sensibilities.”²

Fathers, strength through love and tenderness co-exist when raising a child. Mutual submission and submission to Christ should remain foremost in our interactions with one another, regardless of a person’s role in the family.

¹ Rogers CL Jr. and Rogers CL III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998.

² Lincoln, A. T. (2002). *Vol. 42: Word Biblical Commentary : Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary (402–410). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Ephesians 6.5-8

Before we read this passage, it might be helpful to switch gears from our post-Abolition/Emancipation mindset. Ancient slavery was a functional part of the labor structure in Greco-Roman society, and by the 1st Century, slaves often worked to obtain their freedom.¹ And, while there may have been some parallels between British/American and ancient slavery with regards to how slaves were treated and especially with the inferior status of slaves, there were enough differences that we cannot allow our 21st Century idea and judgment of the institution to dominate our thinking when reading this passage.

Something supernatural happens when we allow work to become something we do for God. A higher purpose and calling seep into our hearts and speak volumes to our spirits about our value as humans and our life’s purpose. We can finally become unattached from the world’s value system because we have in mind an audience of One, the *only* One we need to aim to please. A phrase in the original passage is striking: one is to obey, “*...not according to the eye service like men pleasers.*” (v6) This is wise instruction. How often do we behave one way when people are looking and then another way when we are alone? Are we immersing ourselves in our work equally when our boss’s or others’ eyes are on us as when they are not? Are we surfing, Facebooking, or sending personal texts or emails instead of diligently working when the boss is away? Do we treat those in our care or supervision differently when people are watching than when we are not being watched?

Another striking phrase comes directly after this: instead, we are to be “*like slaves of Christ.*” (v 6) Cool imagery. It puts our life’s work, regardless of the seeming drudgery or menial or lowly task, into the context of our relationship with Christ. God is our boss! This perspective greatly expands the purpose of our lives by lifting it above its face value, giving it more of a transcendent quality. Discover how God can be encountered in your work through prayer and meditation *while* you work, focusing on Him as your Supervisor, seeing others as He sees them, gaining your identity from Him, and becoming more Christlike by becoming more of a servant.

¹ Lincoln, A. T. (2002). *Vol. 42: Word Biblical Commentary : Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary (411–428). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Ephesians 6.9

For anyone who professes Christ, God is their boss. He is fair and very reasonable and exercises much grace and compassion in His dealings with us. If you are an earthly boss or supervisor of someone or a group, then your role model is the Lord, and He is your go-to advisor for help in navigating the waters of working relationships and interactions. These relationships can be trying circumstances as we all bring to the mix our varied and twisted personalities, egos, past relational experiences (“baggage”), ways of communicating, and agendas. All of these exert much pressure on working relationships in any organization because, well, people are involved.

Every person is worthy of respect out of deference to the Lord because every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26-27). If it’s not obvious by now, all of these instructions hinge on the “*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*” command in Ephesians 5.21. Similarly, all of that is also embedded in the section on wise and Spirit-filled living, beginning in Ephesians 4.15. Taken together, power and right responsibility go hand-in-hand. Using power wisely and with respect to your relationship in Christ, while viewing others as equally human, are powerful launch points in leading or managing people in resourceful and Christlike ways. Think of people who you have authority over and lead, and ask God to give you a picture of how He, the Uber Master, would have you treat your earthly subordinates. Give yourself a “time-out” as often as is needed to prayerfully seek God’s wisdom into these matters – after all, it was He who placed you in that position of authority and for a purpose.