

Really...Submit?

Ephesians 5:21-33

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January 20, 2019

21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' ³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Have you ever been bursting at the seams to share some good news?

- I got the job.
- They accepted our offer
- His cancer is in remission
- She said yes
- You're getting a raise
- We're having a baby
- Our financial planner said we are good to retire next year

These are some of the big-time examples of good news; powerful, “above-the-fold” news flashes. But we find good news in less dramatic examples as well:

- There is cake in the breakroom

- The grandkids are coming to visit
- I got an “A” on my exam
- Starbucks is bringing back the Pumpkin Spice Latte

Sometimes what follows good news is a dose of reality. “We’re having a baby!”...oh...diapers, dance recitals, college expenses. “We got the house!”...oh...packing, moving, yard work, bills, cleaning, upkeep.

And sometimes it happens in reverse. Sometimes the good news follows the reality. Because of this, we often miss the good news in our lives because the “lead” gets buried in the story. Last year, there was an Allstate commercial on television that highlighted this. It opened with a teenage boy popping into his parents’ room late one evening. Mom and Dad are in bed reading. The young man, standing at the door and speaking very quickly, tells his parents that he had a “very minor fender bender tonight in an unreasonably narrow fast food drive thru lane.” The teen quickly pivots to tell them that this is a powerful life lesson. “And don’t worry, I have everything handled,” he says. “I’ve already spoken to our insurance agent...and it’s so smart on your part that we have their accident forgiveness policy...The fact that they’ll just forgive you...” At which point mom interrupts him with a quick punishment: “Four weeks without the car.” Realizing that he probably got off easy, the boy says “Ok, goodnight” and rapidly retreats to his bedroom.

From his perspective, the teenage boy thought the good news was in their insurance policy, but mom didn’t hear anything after “fender-bender.”

You and I can relate to this. Sometimes we hear something or see something that throws up blinders to everything else that comes next; to the rest of the story. It’s what causes us to miss a seemingly important detail. And it’s why I know that some of you didn’t hear a thing in our scripture reading this morning after “Wives be subject to your husbands.”

When that verse was read a few moments ago, I could feel the shutter go through the room. Some of you immediately stiffened up. Some of you looked around to see if anyone else had heard it, too. In mere nanoseconds, some of you already drafted cold-blooded

emails to me for choosing this passage or dreamed about how you could pin me to the wall on the way out of church.

On the other hand, those of you with a Y chromosome had one of two reactions. Some of you said “right on”– this is going to serve me well this afternoon. And the rest of you more sensible men got really uncomfortable. You guys started thinking – “Maybe I should go to the bathroom, or check on the kids in Children’s Church because you knew “she” wasn’t going to be happy about this.

This is week two of our FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions sermon series. And the question before us this morning is one of those challenging questions. Are wives supposed to submit to their husbands? Really?

As Episcopal priest Francis Wade notes, this passage manages to push all our buttons at once - personal, emotional, and historical.ⁱ That’s okay. It should bother you. Parts of this passage offend our Twenty-First Century sensibilities. Yet, I suspect that regardless of your initial reaction, this scripture also sparked a little curiosity in each of you. And that’s good, because if we throw the blinders up, or shut down and too quickly dismiss this text as irrelevant to today’s egalitarian society, we miss the good news found within this passage.

But to understand the good news here, we have to start elsewhere – with the good news about Jesus Christ summed up in the familiar words of John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

That verse, John 3:16, is the gospel for you and me personally. God so loved – with such great intensity God massively loved an undeserving world – that he gave his only son – the promised Messiah of the Old Testament and the One who fulfills the deepest hopes of the human heart. By his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled every demand of God in our place.

But God doesn't stop there. God gave his only son so that those who believe shall not perish, but have everlasting life – will have an everlasting relationship with God through Christ. That kind of real belief takes us into Christ. It causes us to surrender our autonomy for his. As Ray Ortlund describes it, what matters most to God is whether we are bonded by faith with his only Son. In other words, God's final category for you is not your goodness versus your badness, but your union with Christ versus your distance from Christ.ⁱⁱ

It's this notion of our union with Christ in the gospel summation of John 3:16 that then enables us to see the good news found in our scripture reading from Ephesians 5. That is...if we can get past the stumbling blocks of verses 22-24. To do that, we have shed some light on a few things about this text.

First, Asia Minor in the First Century was a long way from 21st Century North America. Back then, there was a far different understanding of family roles. First Century Jews had a low view of women. Women were property, baby machines, and home support for male-centered economic enterprises. That why in his morning prayer there was a sentence in which a Jewish man gave thanks that God had not made him “a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Greeks and Romans were not much better. The Greeks adhered to a set of household codes developed by Aristotle which designated that free male household leaders were the most important agents in the household and that other members, such as the wife, children, or enslaved, were beholden to this man.^{iv} This was mirrored in the Roman family law, *patria potestas* or “power of the father.” Under this law, the oldest living male in the household exercised autocratic authority over the extended family.

This was the way of the world when the early church began to take shape. These standards were largely followed by early Christians in hopes that adherence to these codes would not give cause for criticism by the community at large. That's why when Paul wrote that wives should be subject to their husbands, the response was not “huh?” but “duh.”^v In the First Century, there was no question about women being subject to men.

But, while he sounds sexist today, Paul was not at all sexist in the First Century. Paul actually had a revolutionary attitude toward women. That will make more sense in just a moment.

The second thing we have to understand to get past the stumbling blocks of verses 22-24 is what the phrase “be subject to” or “submit to” means. What immediately comes to mind is subordination - “blind obedience...unthinking subservience.”^{vi} But what you need to know is this: Paul never once tells wives to obey or to be obedient to their husbands. Not once in the book of Ephesians or in any other letter does Paul ask women to obey their husbands. Yet, we all have seen it used/abused this way.

So if “be subject to” or “submit” isn’t about obedience, what is it about? Verse 22 actually gives us a clue. When it was read a few moments ago, you heard “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.” However, in the oldest Greek manuscripts, there is no verb in verse 22. It literally reads “Wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord.” This was a typical Greek grammatical way of doing things. You would make a statement with a verb, and then in the next statement you would infer the verb. So verse 22 infers, or borrows, a verb from verse 21. And what that also means is that verse 21 provides the overarching principle. It sets the stage for what comes next.

Ephesians 5:21 reads “Be subject (or submit) to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Verse 21 calls for mutual submission or mutual consent in a spirit of yieldedness. Verse 22 (*Wives, be subject to your husbands*) doesn’t stand without verse 21 (*Be subject to one another*). Everybody is to submit to everyone in the family. There is no mono-submission. Men and women are to be mutually submissive, mutually servants, mutually loving and caring for each other.

This is why Paul was not a sexist, but a revolutionary. When Paul suggested that men should also be subject to women – something that seems more commonplace today – this was totally counter-cultural to First Century norms. But dominion by either gender was not Paul’s agenda. Instead, Paul wanted to make a point to the church about relationships. And

that leads us to the final thing we need to understand to break down the stumbling blocks of verses 22-24.

Now, there certainly are lessons for how spouses and families should treat each other throughout our scripture lesson this morning. But to focus solely on family dynamics is to miss that Paul was viewing these relationships through the grid of Christ and the church rather than husband and wife.

Again, we can look at verse 21. *Be subject to one another out of a reverence for Christ.* Whenever Paul asks his readers to do something, he points back to Jesus. As God has done something extraordinary for you, so you should do something extraordinary. As Jesus has loved you, you are to have the same kind of love in all your relationships. As Christ is the head of the church, so you – the church; men and women – are subject to Christ.

And after establishing that reality, Paul then gives us the gospel for the church. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, making her holy and without blemish, so as to present her to himself in splendor (5:25b-27). This is the good news for the church. The fact is, in this marriage, the bride of Christ – the church - is no beauty queen. We sometimes do things that are ugly and unattractive. We are unfaithful to him. But in spite of that, Christ loves us. He claims us and renews us.^{vii} And by giving up his life for each of us, he modeled a particular kind of love – a sacrificial, purifying, caring, and unbreakable love^{viii} - that should characterize our relationships at home, at work, on the golf course, and especially here at church. Said another way, it's in Christ's ultimate act of submission that we find the model for our relationships with each other.

Here's why this matters. When we draw connections between the good news and our actions, it changes our thinking, our attitudes, and our approach. Just as the good news of a job promotion may bring about increased responsibilities, so, too, the good news for the church – for all of us - found in Ephesians 5 brings about an assignment. As the church – the bride of Christ - has been a recipient of grace, we should be taking the lead in fostering a culture of grace.

Francis Schaeffer wrote that the church must be known for the reality of its community. He described the early church as “an orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church.”^{ix} As Schaeffer further suggests, by the grace of God, they were known by that belief and practice of community. Said more plainly, the early church understood what true community looked like and believed it was important. That was the orthodoxy – the right belief. But not only did they believe it, they lived it. That was the orthopraxy – the right practice of that belief. And because that belief and practice was visible to others, it stood out as different from the rest of society.

When we talk about being church today, we need to be known for the reality of our community – of our culture of grace. When it seems that every choice, every decision, every action in our daily lives forces us to choose an end of the spectrum, we need an oasis from the sharp divisiveness of society. We need a place characterized by grace when things don’t go our way, by forgiveness when we have been wronged, by acceptance when everything else and everyone else seem to be pushing us away. Or said another way, in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, love. That’s the sign of a culture of grace. And that kind of culture only happens when Christ is the head, and when, by his example, we are subject to one another out of reverence for him.

Now I recognize that for some of you, the idea of submission or being subject to another still feels weird to you – still offends your liberated sensibilities. If so, try using the word sacrifice. I suspect you could get on board with the notion of sacrificing for your spouse. After all, you already do it – you already make sacrifices for each other. You sacrifice your individuality, you sacrifice career opportunities, and you sacrifice what’s best for you individually for what’s best for you collectively. You sacrifice sleep when she wants to talk and you sacrifice attention to detail when he wants to watch television. You both sacrifice wants for the needs of the other. We understand mutual sacrifice when it comes to our spouses. In the same way, this same sort of mutual sacrifice should also characterize our other relationships. We sacrifice for our kids. We sacrifice for our parents when the roles

reverse. We sacrifice for our colleague down the hall who is going through a rough patch. And we sacrifice for the children, youth, and adults within our church.

Should wives submit to their husbands? Yes. Should husbands submit to their wives? Yes. Should children submit to their parents? Yes. And the list could go on because this is what mutual sacrifice looks like. And most of all, should the church submit to its Lord? Absolutely.

So where do we start? I think a culture of grace and mutual sacrifice begins with asking the question, “What can I do to help?” By genuinely asking this question, you are leveraging your assets, your time, and your power for the benefit of another. You are setting aside your agenda so that you can meet the needs of another – your spouse, your child, your friend, your fellow church member, someone in need. “What can I do to help?” is basically saying, “You first.”^x When you have someone else’s best interest in mind, you have in effect submitted to them – sacrificed for them.

And here’s what happens when we do this. When we sacrifice for someone else, we point beyond ourselves. We point to them. We point to Jesus Christ. And we say they’re first. So what can you do to help? Believe the good news...and then live it out – out of reverence for Christ.

ⁱ Wade, Francis H. *Be Subject to One Another*. http://day1.org/833-be_subject_to_one_another

ⁱⁱ Ortlund, Ray. *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barclay, William. “The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians” in *The Daily Bible Study Series*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976.

^{iv} Sadler, Rodney, Jr. *Resurrection Remix: Strengthening the Family*.

<http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=20>

^v Stanley, Andy. *Mutual Submission*. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2017/10/20/andy-stanley-mutual-submission/>

^{vi} Martin, Ralph P. “Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991.

^{vii} Ortlund.

^{viii} Barclay.

^{ix} Ortlund.

^x Stanley.