

Introduction

One of the joys of preaching a series from a book or an Epistle is that you get continuity of teaching and understanding. We get to know the writer and learn what he has to say, teach and impart. We begin to understand the context of the lives of the hearers and to understand what they are experiencing. We also get to see that the people at the time faced similar problems to those we face today.

On the other hand one of the difficulties of preaching such a series is that you have to take the rough with the smooth and deal with both the joyful, easy verses as well as the difficult passages. That last comment describes part of today's passage: difficult! Cultural and social attitudes have changed dramatically over the 2000 years since this Epistle to the Ephesians was written and so relating what Paul has to say on certain issues isn't easy. However, it is important for us to look at these issues, take into account what the Apostle has to say and see how we can apply his words to today.

Part 1 – 5:21a – Submission

The main thrust of the few verses that I want to focus on concerns submission; that is, submitting to others. Now generally speaking we don't like to submit to anyone else do we? We always want to be the one in control and the thought of submitting to anyone is anathema to the majority of us which is why it is such a contentious subject. It is also controversial since submission can involve obedience and discipline, qualities which in many ways are sadly lacking in 2023. In the modern age in which we live the vast majority of people appear to be totally self-centred and have the attitude of "*me, me, me*", which is why they do not like the thought of submitting to anyone. In his commentary on Ephesians, the American Pastor and commentator John MacArthur writes: "*The self-centred life is always in a battle for the top, and pushes others down as it climbs up in pride.*"¹ Compare that with what the Apostle Paul told the Philippians: "*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*" ([Philippians 2:4](#)); quite a contrast!

In that strange sport of the World Wrestling Federation, an American import which can be seen on satellite TV, a submission involves force and violence of some sort. Thankfully in this passage submission involves love and respect; that is quite a difference!

With that in mind the first verse that I want us to look at is a really interesting if rather short verse. In the NIV and the NEB versions of the Bible the verse appears as a single sentence in a single paragraph. In other versions of Scripture it appears as the final clause in the longer preceding paragraph. I mention this not as part of an English lesson but to highlight the importance of what Paul has to say in these few words.

The Apostle actually writes: "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" The late John Stott wrote in his commentary on that verse: "*Those who are truly subject to Jesus Christ do not find it difficult to submit to each other as well.*"² To understand what Paul is saying here I want us to think about that verse in two halves as that's the way it seems to flow. Firstly, Paul's desire is that we submit to one another; which I read as meaning our Christian brothers and sisters although I will expand on that thought later. The word

¹ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary - Ephesians*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 1986, Page 276

² Stott, John, *Bible Speaks Today - Message of Ephesians*, electronic version

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“*submit*” has multiple meanings which include to surrender; to yield; to give in; to comply or to succumb. I suggest that none of those meanings truly apply here. However, the word “*defer*” can also carry the meaning of a voluntary yielding or submitting out of respect or reverence for or deference and affection toward another which is exactly what Paul is looking for. He doesn’t want us to roll over and give in or to let ourselves be walked over by others. He does want us though to take others feelings and needs into consideration when we do anything.

It is important for us to understand that submission is not a sign of weakness but could possibly be seen as a sign of strength and confidence. The act of submission involves many things but especially humility. As part of our being submissive we need to humble ourselves and consider the feelings of others rather than ourselves and behave accordingly towards them. When we come to faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit and filled by Him. As part of that being filled He will lead us to an attitude of humility and willingness to submit to others. Whatever we do we should avoid lording it over people. In [Mark 10:42-45](#) we can read of the time when James and John asked to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands. Following that request Jesus spoke to the other 10 disciples and told them “*You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” We should never forget that Jesus came to serve and if we believe in Him and follow Him then we too should be willing to serve, something which involves a level of submission. Scripture has many examples of how we can both serve and show humility. For instance in [Ephesians 4:2](#) Paul tells us to be kind and compassionate; in [1 Thessalonians 4:9](#) we are told to love one another; in [1 Thessalonians 5:11](#) Paul tells us to encourage and build up one another whilst in [1 Corinthians 12:25](#) we are urged to show concern for each other and in [Galatians 6:2](#) we are urged to “*carry each other’s burdens*”. A very important comment comes in [Romans 15:7a](#) where Paul tells us: “*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you*”. Christ accepted us into His family unconditionally; despite all our sins and faults and we should do the same with our brothers and sisters. We are all different and come from different backgrounds and live in different situations and yet as brothers and sisters in Christ we are equals and that means we should accept one another as equals rather than looking down on people and focussing on any perceived differences.

As part of our submitting, it is also important that we follow God’s will for our lives. Consequently as believers in Jesus Christ we should always try and be like Him and that means following God’s will for our lives. When He was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed Jesus knew what was about to happen and yet fell to the ground and prayed “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.*” ([Matthew 26:39](#)). Jesus humbled Himself and followed His Father’s will. We should endeavour to do the same.

Part 2 – 5:21b – Reverence and Fear

In the second half of the verse Paul explains why we should submit to one another. In the first half we are told to submit to one another and in the second half we learn why and how we should submit. The NIV that we use here says we should submit “*out of reverence for Christ*” whilst the King James Version says we should submit “*in the fear of God*”. Let’s just

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think about fear for a moment; should we be afraid of God? Yes, it is only right that we should be afraid of God since He will Judge us when the time comes and we should never forget that He knows everything about us. With that thought in mind Matthew quotes the Lord's words where Jesus tells His disciples: "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (Matthew 10:28) We know that God has great power that He uses as He wills. An example of that power comes in Acts 5:1-11 we read of Ananias and his wife who both dropped down dead after lying to the Holy Spirit. Always remember, God is the Judge.

However, the NIV that we use together with most other modern translations say that we should submit to one another "*out of reverence for Christ*", words which carry a subtly different meaning. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour and as such we should respect and honour Him each and every day. That word "*reverence*" carries with it the meaning of awe mingled with respect and esteem and there can be little doubt that Jesus is awesome! He willingly went to the cross to die on our behalf to pay the price for our sins and then rose again on the third day just as He said He would. It seems only right then that we should submit, or defer to, our brothers and sisters out of respect and honour for our risen Lord.

Just to digress for a moment we need to think about submission in other areas of life. It is important that in all parts of society there is law and order since anything else leads to anarchy, and that is why Scripture also tells us to submit to governments and authorities. Paul backs up such thoughts in Romans 13 where he tells us "*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*" (Romans 13:1). The Apostle goes on to add "*Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.*" (Romans 13:5). Whether we like the government or not God has appointed them and consequently we should submit to them.

Part 3 – 5:22-24 – Wives

As we come to look at the next few verses, 5:22-33, we need to remember that when Paul wrote this, the prevailing society was highly patriarchal; in other words, men ruled and to some extent women were regarded as second class citizens. In our modern politically correct and woke society such a situation doesn't exist which is why some people find these verses difficult to cope with. It is these prevailing attitudes towards women and marriage that suddenly makes these verses very controversial. However, for Bible believing Christians they should be relatively easy to understand and follow, given that the verses were actually written to Christian couples and so that is our basic starting point. Despite that though, I believe that they can also apply to couples where only one partner is a Christian as well as well as to non-believing but loving married couples.

I should point out that this is not solely about wives since Paul devotes twice as much space in this short passage to the role of husbands as he does to wives! Once we get over the opening comment in 5:22 that "*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord*" we will soon see Paul's instructions to husbands. Unfortunately 5:22-33 are difficult verses which many do not read carefully enough and as I've already hinted, the thought of women submitting to men in any way is anathema in the 21st century society in which we live. However, regardless of modern attitudes this is God's plan for the family and in too many cases today's families do not reflect that glorious plan. Look round and we see a

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proliferation of single parent families, same sex couples with children, families living apart, domestic disturbance. I do accept that death can sometimes be the cause of single parent families but God intended families to consist of a man and his wife with children where possible; no other family structure fits that plan. In his commentary on this passage John MacArthur discusses the breakdown of the family structure as designed by God. He makes it clear that “*Marital infidelity, exaltation of sexual sin, homosexuality, abortion, women’s liberation, delinquency, and the sexual revolution in general have all contributed to the family’s demise.*”³ When you think about that comment carefully I’m sure you’ll agree that MacArthur is quite right.

As I mentioned a moment ago you need to read this short passage carefully to see that more is said about men and their behaviour than about women and wives. However, all too often people read that first part in **5:22** and then skip over the rest of the passage on the basis that the verses don’t fit modern thinking and so can be ignored.

Despite any misgivings people may have these are important verses where Paul is writing to remind the Ephesian believers of God’s plan for marital relationships. John MacArthur points out that: “*The relationship between husband and wife was to be modelled on that between Christ and His church.*”⁴ Just as Christ loves His church and gave Himself for it so our relationships are to be founded on love, humility and mutual submission. Paul tells us in **Philippians 2:5-11** that Christ willingly humbled Himself and submitted to God’s will by dying on the cross of Calvary to pay for our sins. Just as Christ submitted to His Father wives are told at the beginning of **5:22** to submit to their husbands “*as to the Lord*”. In other words this submission is to be humble and voluntary; i.e. the wife should be willing to submit to her husband and not do so out of fear or bullying. As part of this relationship, the husband is not to treat his wife as a slave but as an equal. You may remember that Paul wrote to the Galatians and told them that “*you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (**Galatians 3:28**) and are therefore equals because of Him. Many non-Christian wives would struggle to understand and comply with the instruction to submit believing that it means subjugation to a man and that is something which to some people carries the thought of coercion. That is not what Paul means or implies which is why he has added that phrase “*as to the Lord*”. As Christians we are told to submit to the Lord; we’ve just been told in **5:21** to “*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*”, in other words because we honour and revere Christ a wife should submit to her husband in an act of humility just as He was willing to humble Himself. Paul then adds in **5:23** that the husband is the head of the wife and family just as Christ is the Head of the Church.

Part 4 - Husbands

Whilst all of this is wonderful it isn’t one sided since just as the wife is told to submit to her husband so the husband is told to love his wife just as much as he loves his own body. With that in mind let’s move on to see what he has to say to husbands about their responsibilities. Possibly the first important thing to note is that nowhere does Paul mention domination of any sort. He does however mention that the husband’s overriding action and focus should be on love. He mentions husbands and love five times in **5:25-33**. In **5:25** he says: “*Husbands, love your wives*”. In **5:28a** he tells us that “*husbands ought to love their*

³ MacArthur, page 271

⁴ MacArthur, page 273

wives as their own bodies". He qualifies that comment later in 5:29 by saying "no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it" which is why he tells us in 5:28b "He who loves his wife loves himself" before adding in 5:33 "each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself". I don't think there's any ambiguity in those comments; Paul is making it crystal clear that love should be at the centre of the relationship.

Although Paul has already said that wives should submit to their husbands, he ends the passage with the simple instruction in 5:33 that "*the wife must respect her husband*". Remember that respect has to be earned and cannot be demanded which is why love and faith in Christ should always be at the centre.

Part 5 – "Mixed" Marriages

I mentioned at the outset that these verses were written to believers in Ephesus; people who already knew and loved Christ and who knew, loved and followed God's Word. However, Scripture does acknowledge that there may be what one might call "*mixed*" marriages where the wife is a believer but the husband isn't. I would suggest therefore that Paul's instruction that wives should submit to their husbands still applies. The Apostle Peter gives us a clue as to why that should be when he says "*Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives,*" (1 Peter 3:1). In the preceding verses, 1 Peter 2:13-25, Peter has been talking about our being submissive to our rulers and masters which is why he begins 1 Peter 3 with that comment about wives.

Although Scripture doesn't explicitly make any similar remarks about believing husbands and non-believing wives I would suggest that if wives can influence husbands through their faith in Christ, I see no reason why husbands cannot do the same in reverse. As Christians we should always remember that people are observing our behaviour and attitudes and so I see no reason why a non-believing spouse shouldn't observe their partner in that way and come to understand that they too need to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Part 5 – Marriage

In 5:31-32 Paul goes on to liken a man and a woman being married to the relationship between Christ and His church. The church is a God given gift to His family and the relationship between Christ and His church is all part of God's plan for eternity. All those who come to faith in Christ as their Lord and Saviour become members of His church and have that special relationship with Him. Marriage is also a God given gift and as Paul makes clear it is intended to be between a man and a woman; in God's plan for his children there is no other acceptable form of marriage! Modern society may disagree but believers should always endeavour to follow God's Word.

Conclusion

So there you have it; do you follow the world's ways or do you follow God's ways? The ways of the world for marriage and the family can only lead to destruction whilst God's ways will led to glory.

In today's world the standards for life and relationships are constantly changing, generally for the worse. Attitudes and behaviour seem to be dictated by a faceless group dishing out

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woke opinions on social media that too many people take to be the truth. This sinful way of life can only lead to death just as Paul tells us in **Romans 6:23** where he reminds us "*the wages of sin is death*".

If we follow God's ways the standards for life and relationships are made very clear in God's Word and they are standards that never change and are given so that our lives may be spent in peace, love and happiness in God's presence.

In the passage we've just looked at Paul gives instructions on how Christians should behave towards one another in their marital relationships. His guidance is not onerous and the comment that wives should submit to their husbands isn't all that it may seem. Husbands too have responsibilities to their wives and need to play their part in the relationship that God has ordained for them.

The relationship between wives and husbands should be focussed on submission, love and respect and it should be conducted against the background of love and reverence for Christ.

If you do not yet know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour then now could be a good time to do it. Submit to Him and enjoy that special relationship with Him and the improved family relationships that it can bring.