

“The Paradox of Submission”
Ephesians 5:22-33
November 23, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

We’re looking today at the topic of submission, particularly God’s call to wives to submit to their husbands. Several months ago, someone sent me a joke about two young fish swimming along in the sea, when they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. He nods at the younger fish and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks at the other and says, “What the heck is water?”

Just as a fish doesn’t feel wetness even though he is literally swimming in it, it is very easy for us not to feel the widespread scorn in which the idea of submission of any kind is held. We are swimming in a sea of non-submission. Perhaps you remember the royal wedding of Fergie and Prince Andrew several years ago. In a moment that was replayed frequently after the wedding, they came to the point where they were to make their vows to one another. Fergie was supposed to say, “I promise to love, honor, and obey...” She did repeat those words, but with a sideways glance and grin that spoke more clearly than her words what she was really thinking. It was as if she were really saying to Andrew, “We all know that these are just words from some ancient tradition, and that no one really believes them anymore. And you certainly better not believe them, either.” Not surprisingly, her marriage ended in divorce a few years later.

The Bible has a far more positive view of submission than the view current in our day. Paul writes in verse 21 about the general attitude of submission that is to prevail among all Christ’s followers. We are to walk wisely in this world (v. 15), and this wisdom includes such things as **“giving thanks always and for everything to God”** and **“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ”** (v. 20-21). Then Paul specifies three specific relationships where submission is to be given: in marriage, in the parent-child relationship and that of slaves to their masters. We are going to look today at the submission of wives to their husbands, noting three truths about it.

I. Submission’s Action

Submission involves both an action and an attitude. The act of submission is that of obedience. That can be seen clearly in a parallel passage from 1 Peter 3, where wives are told to focus on adorning themselves as the holy women of old, **“by submitting to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord”** (3:5-6). To submit is to put oneself under the authority God has given to another, which includes obeying that person. Paul strengthens it even further in verse 24 when he adds the phrase **“in everything.”** It couldn’t be any other way

than “in everything” because if one excludes all areas that are found to be troublesome, then there is no submission at all. For example, if we only obey God when we want to, then we have elevated ourselves to the place of absolute authority and are not submitting to him at all. So Paul reminds wives that they are to submit in this comprehensive way.

I do not need to tell you that this is not a very popular idea these days. As a result, several attempts have been made to soften it or even eliminate it altogether. Some would say that it is a culturally driven command, not one that is abiding for all times and places. In other words, Paul was simply describing how Christian wives of his era were to behave, and didn't intend to similarly restrict wives of every era. He is simply asking for conformity to the practices of his day so that Christianity will not be needlessly offensive. This argument is pressed by drawing on the commands related to slavery in the next chapter, where slaves are told to obey their masters. It is claimed that since we no longer acknowledge the institution of slavery, so we can legitimately no longer acknowledge the marital roles Paul commands here. With the demise of slavery is also the demise of gender roles in marriage.

This argument for complete egalitarianism within marriage is misguided for several reasons. As to the analogy with slavery, if that line of reasoning is pursued, then we would have to say that the parent-child role is also swept away. It appears between Paul's treatment of marriage and of slavery, so if the first and third are swept away, the middle one would have to go too. Second, the sheer repetition of this command for the submission of wives throughout the Bible would suggest that it is not intended to be culturally relevant only to Paul's day. In the passage we quoted earlier from Peter, he points out how Abraham's wife, Sarah, also submitted herself in marriage. Further, Paul bases the command on something that transcends all cultures, the relationship of Christ and the church. **“Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands”** (v. 24).

It needs to be pointed out, however, that there are several things that need to be said that do legitimately soften this command. First, I notice that the command is given to women to submit themselves, not to their husbands to subjugate their wives. In other words, in a Christian marriage the wife is to offer this submission, rather than the husband compelling it. Second, she is to submit **“as to the Lord.”** That means a couple of things. It means that her highest allegiance is always to the Lord, and if her husband requires of her something that displeases the Lord, she obeys God rather than her husband. But this also means that even in her submission to the Lord, she is looking over his shoulder to the Lord, and saying, in effect, “I'm submitting to him for your sake and your glory. He is not always worthy of my submission, but you are.” Third, it needs to be pointed out these commands regarding marriage are not male and female value statements. Paul is not saying that women are inferior to men in any way. He spoke elsewhere of their oneness in Christ. **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are**

all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). He is assigning complementary roles within the institution of marriage, not making value statements about the genders nor intending to limit the role of women outside of marriage. He is not saying that men always have to be in charge, even outside of marriage. Remember too that the same language of headship and submission is used to describe the Trinity. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 we read, **“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”** Orthodox Christian belief has always insisted on the essential equality between the members of the Trinity.

II. Submission’s Attitude

As Paul describes the submission to be offered by the wife, he uses another word in verse 33 that addresses the attitude of submission. **“Let the wife see that she respects her husband.”** Submission includes an attitude as well as an action. The King James and some other translations use an even stronger word and say, “Let the wife see that she *reverence* her husband.” What does it mean for a wife to show respect to her husband, especially in light of the fact that all husbands are also sinners? I think it means at least a couple of things.

For a wife to respect her husband means first that she respects the office of headship given him by God. To have the office of headship means that the husband will have to answer to God for the way he has taken spiritual leadership in the marriage and family. A wife who understands her husband’s responsibility before God will be struck with awe at the magnitude of it. The result will be her respect for his office, even if the one holding the office doesn’t always carry it out as he should.

Respect also means that a wife is to affirm her husband for what he is doing that is right rather than criticizing him for those areas of deficiency in his heart or behavior. In his book *Each for the Other*, Bryan Chapell describes a distraught husband who came to the end of his rope and wanted to be released from his wife’s love.

He had lost his job, spent his last dollar on diversions to make him forget, and had returned home expecting his wife to add her scorn to the weight of his self-defeat. Instead, she told him that she loved him. He collapsed sobbing into a chair in the living room, and as I looked on, she placed a hand on his shoulder and for the next half hour reminded him of the good she loved in him.

The words the wife spoke did as much to fill her heart with care as they did to rebuild the young man’s self-respect. She told him how she admired his sensitivity and care for their children. She reminded him of the ways he made her laugh and of moments their family treasured. She listed the people who believed in him. Simply by recounting what she did respect in this terribly flawed man, the wife’s eyes glistened with renewed love. He knew that he was undeserving of this kind of love. At one point he objected to her words, “I don’t want you to love me so much.” She responded

simply, “God does.” She gave her husband respect not only because he needed it, but because she knew God delighted in it (p. 123).

Before we go on to our next point, we need to say just a word about one of the more difficult issues arising from the command given to the wife to obey and respect her husband. What should a wife do whose husband abuses his headship role? He doesn’t command her to do things that are overtly contrary to God’s word, but he misuses his headship to subjugate his wife in very self-centered ways. Instead of cherishing and nourishing her, seeking to help her flourish as we saw last week God requires of him, he uses and abuses her. Is a wife to submit herself to this abusive headship? Let me just say two things in answer to this question. First, just because headship can be abused doesn’t mean that it is wrong. It would be a mistake to throw out the whole notion of headship and submission just because some selfishly abuse it. Second, there are often not such easy answers to this question, and that’s why God has given us the gifts within the body of Christ. I believe that women in these abusive relationships should seek the counsel of godly men and women within the church. As they pray and talk it out together, I believe they can arrive at God-pleasing decisions about this.

III. Submission’s Outcome

In his discussion of marital roles, Paul reminds us of the goal of marriage from God’s statement about it in Genesis 2. The goal is that of unity, two flesh becoming one. **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”** (v. 31). The outcome of the wife’s submission is a deepening of marital unity, the two becoming one. An important application stems from this. Submission, not control, is the way to get what you long for in your marriage. It is not new information to any wife that all husbands have areas where they need to change. But it is new information to many wives to understand that the path for such needed change is loving submission, not taking control. Peter says the same thing in addressing Christian wives whose husbands need fundamental change because they do not believe in the Lord at all. **“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives—when they see your respectful and pure conduct”** (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Several years ago, *Readers Digest* told a true story about a woman who was waiting in an airport to catch a plane. While waiting, she decided to eat some of the chocolate chip cookies she had brought with her. The cookies were on the seat beside her, and there was a man sitting in the seat on the other side of the open bag of cookies. As she was eating her cookies and reading her book, she was surprised and a little angry when the man sitting next to the cookies reached in and took one for himself. She didn’t know the man, so she didn’t say a word to him. She just reached in and took another cookie. Then he reached in and got a second cookie. Shortly after that, it became a race as they took turns eating

cookies out of the bag and as she grew more and more angry. Not a word passed between them until there was only one cookie left in the bag, and he turned to her and said pleasantly, "I've saved the last one for you." She angrily grabbed the cookie, gathered all of her possessions and went to find another seat. Not long after that, her plane was ready for boarding and she found her seat and opened her carry-on bag to get something out before stowing it for the flight. To her absolute horror, she discovered lying in her bag an unopened bag of chocolate chip cookies. The whole time she had been sitting next to that man thinking that he was eating her cookies, when the truth was that she had been eating his, which happened to be identical to her own.

It may be the case that some of the wives here today need just such a moment of realization. You have been thinking that your insightful suggestions to your husband about how he can improve as a husband or as a person are helping your marriage, when actually they are bringing harm. Proverbs 14:1 says, "**The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.**" I don't think this foolish woman intends on tearing down her house, but she does anyway. You will build up your husband by showing him respect.

The fuller picture we can see now is that the wife's submission in marriage is not just the act of obedience, because it also includes the attitude of respect. But now one final piece is added; it is obedience and respect that have as their aim the good of her husband. Submission is not the suppression of the woman's gifts, but the full expression of them for her husband's benefit. If you were here last week, you may remember that the husband is called to do the same, to use his God-given role of leadership to the end of his wife's flourishing. The essence of a Christian marriage isn't just the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife, but the use to which they put these roles. The husband leads and the wife submits in such a way that helps the other person become all that God created them to be. Christian marriage is other-centered, affirming the truth that Jesus spoke when he said that any who follow him must deny themselves (Mt. 16:24).

CONCLUSION:

Have you ever noticed that it is precisely in the areas of these God-given roles that both husbands and wives most struggle. Husbands are called to take leadership to see that their wives and families flourish, while wives are to show respect for the good of their husbands. But our instincts are for passivity for the husband and control for the wife. Both of these tendencies come from fear. The husband fears that he is in way over his head and won't be up to such a leadership role, while the wife fears that her husband will never change without her helpful suggestions. The answer to fear is faith. Jesus is the husband of both, loving us and leading us to flourish. Let's look to him now for his help.