

# Spiritual Relationships

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Date: 25 August 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, my name's Tommy. I'm the rector of Church of the Advent. I'm delighted to welcome you here. Now that we have a bulletin once again, you'll see that the text that we'll be looking at is printed in full in the bulletin.

And then after that, there's a section, for those of you, some people like to take notes, and we put a few reflection questions in in case that's helpful to you. We've been looking at this passage in Ephesians.

We've been looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians and following along in this section where Paul talks about, in this letter, the fact that the gospel, the good news of Jesus, changes every aspect of our lives.

The good news of Jesus changes every aspect of our lives. And what we'll be focusing on this morning is the impact of that on our relationships with the closest people around us.

The idea is this, if something this radical, this world changing has happened, and if that has happened to us, if we are now in relationship with the God of the universe, that that should spill out into all other relationships.

[ 1 : 09 ] And if it doesn't, we should be asking questions. So that's what we're gonna be looking at this morning. We're gonna see this text. It's a longer text. I'll tell you in a minute why. We're looking at all of it. We're gonna see a principle here, and then we're gonna talk about what that principle means for us in our closest relationships.

So let's pray, and then we'll be looking at Ephesians chapter 5, verse 15, through chapter 6, verse 9. Lord, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence with us this morning and your word. We pray for your Holy Spirit to guide us as we seek to understand your word. We know that we may be coming from very different places this morning. For some of us, a text like this might raise questions or even make us feel uncomfortable or be challenging to us.

Lord, we know that you know what we need. And so there are some of us here who are complacent, who need to be stirred to action. There are some who are anxious and concerned, and we need to be reassured.

There are some of us here who, Lord, need conviction. We need you to help illuminate areas in our lives of rebellion. Lord, we all need you, and we all need your life in us, Lord.

[ 2 : 21 ] We all need the truth of the gospel. And so we pray that in whatever way that happens by your wisdom, that we would encounter you this morning. In Jesus' name we pray, amen. So first of all, let's look at the principle.

This section of Ephesians, I would say, is very often misunderstood. And one of the reasons it's misunderstood is because of the way most of our Bibles are printed. When you open your Bible to this section, if you have your Bible with you, you can do that.

Most Bibles break this section of Paul's letter into pieces. And so there is a section, verses 15 to 21, that we see as a kind of a part sort of about the Holy Spirit and a list of things that Paul gives us that characterize the new life that we have in Christ.

And then there's a section break, and then there's a new section where Paul seems to switch topics and to start talking about relationships. But if you read this the way it's written, it is meant to all be held together.

And if we read it that way, we see the whole flow of the argument that the Apostle Paul is making. And I would say that fundamentally changes not only how we read this text, but how we apply this passage to our lives.

[ 3 : 37 ] Because this entire passage from verse 15 on is all about the Holy Spirit. Right? This is all about the ministry of the Holy Spirit and what that does in us and in our relationships.

It's about being specifically filled with the Holy Spirit. Filled with the life of God. Now, all believers have the Holy Spirit. Paul has already made that clear earlier in this letter, in fact. But to be filled by the Spirit means the Holy Spirit guides you. The Holy Spirit directs every aspect of your life. It means you are deeply connected to God, and God is ministering through you in ways that are visible.

So Paul is talking now about believers being filled by the Holy Spirit. But that raises a question. How exactly do we do that? Because the verb is passive.

He doesn't say fill yourself with the Holy Spirit. He says be filled with the Holy Spirit. How do you do that? It would be like saying to your kids, instead of saying, hey, go clean your room, let your room be cleaned.

[ 4 : 53 ] Right? Like in the first example, it's clear they need to go get at it. But in the second example, it's not so clear, do they have something to do, or should they just wait for the room to clean itself? Which is, I think, a mistake that very often happens in our house.

What's the role that we have in being filled by the Spirit? Is this something that we do or something that God does? The answer is, as it is often in the Christian faith, the answer is yes.

It's both. Think of the analogy of a sailboat. I heard this from a pastor named Andrew Wilson. I find it helpful. With a sailboat, the sail has to be filled with the wind in order to go anywhere.

But the wind is an external force over which we have no control. So you can't fill the sail. Right? But there are things that you can do to make sure that when the wind blows, your sails will be filled.

So you can put up your sail. You can pull the mainsail tight. You can adjust the jib. These are things that you do to align the sails with the wind as it's blowing to ensure that the sails will be filled by the wind.

[ 6 : 10 ] And I believe this is a lot like what the Apostle Paul has in mind when he calls us to be filled by the Holy Spirit. We can't control the Spirit. But there are things we can do to bring ourselves in alignment with the Holy Spirit.

And I would say this is really what the Christian life is all about. It's about regularly, continually adjusting the sails of our hearts, bringing them into alignment with the heart and the will of Christ so that we can be filled and guided by His Spirit.

Right? The promise is that the Spirit is with us, the Spirit is moving. Are we aligning ourselves such that we can be filled by the Spirit and guided by the Spirit?

How do we do this? Paul gives us several ways to adjust the sails of our hearts. So he says, be filled by the Holy Spirit. And then everything he says after that answers the question, how can we align the sails of our heart so that that would happen?

The first way to do that is fairly obvious. Verse 19, we worship. Like what we're doing here right now. We gather together and we sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs.

[ 7 : 27 ] When we worship, that brings our hearts into alignment with the heart and will of Christ. We're opening ourselves up and saying, I want to be filled by the Spirit just by being here and doing that.

The second practice also makes sense. Prayers of thanksgiving. Verse 20, when you stop in your life and you reflect on the ways that God is blessing you, the ways that God is providing for you, when you recount stories of powerful ways that God has answered prayer in your life, you're aligning the sails of your heart with the heart and will of Christ.

You're opening yourself up to the Holy Spirit. Now, worship, gratitude, you're opening yourself up to the Spirit. All makes sense. But then look what he says. The third, this is a bit of a curveball.

The third way that we align our hearts in seeking to be filled by the Holy Spirit, verse 21, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So worship, gratitude, mutual submission. Now, the word submission has all kinds of negative connotations in our culture and some for very good reason.

[ 8 : 40 ] The Greek word for submission literally means to align oneself below others in rank. To perceive yourself as being lesser in rank for the benefit of the other.

So it was originally a military term. To behave as though you are of a lower rank than the others. So it means being willing to set aside your preferences and to set aside your desires.

It's a willingness to put yourself second and prioritize the well-being of others, maybe at your own expense. That's what it means.

In other words, it means following the example that we see in Jesus Christ Himself. Paul shares a very similar idea in Philippians chapter 2. He says to believers, have this mind among yourselves. In other words, align yourself in this way, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant.

[ 9 : 54 ] Paul says, have that mind among yourselves. In other words, submission, mutual submission, is about becoming a servant the way Jesus Christ became a servant. That means having a heart that is properly aligned toward Christ and toward other people.

Now, I told you that we were going to arrive at a principle, and here it is. Your heart cannot be properly aligned with Christ if it is not also properly aligned toward the other people who are closest to you in your life.

Right? If you live your life as though most of the time you are the most important person in the room, that your needs and preferences and desires should come first, you're never going to have a deep sense of intimacy and connection with God.

There's going to be something out of whack. Your sails are not properly aligned with the heart and the will of Christ. There's going to be a disconnect. So that's the principle.

Now, let's look at what this means for us, for those of us here who follow Jesus. And Paul shows us what it looks like when mutual submission is lived out in three of the most common types of relationships.

[ 11 : 13 ] All of these would have been found in the home in the first century, and they're still today probably three of our most common. If you think about the people that you spend the most time with, it's probably in your marriage if you're married, parenting if you have kids, and the workplace.

And he gives, listen, he gives different exhortations from one person to the next. He gives specific instructions depending on what roles we play. But the thing we need to understand is that these are all different ways of doing the same thing.

Right? They're different ways of doing the same thing, which is becoming a servant. Putting aside our needs and preferences and prioritizing the well-being of another at our own expense.

Different ways of doing the same thing. So first of all, we want to look at marriage. Now, of course, in this passage in general, this tends to be the most contentious of the three.

You know, I've had ways of reading this when I was younger, ways of reading now that I've gotten a little bit older. I would say, I think most people who struggle with this passage I would say, get married if you can and be married for 10 years.

[ 12 : 27 ] And be married for 15 years. And I guarantee you it will start to shift how you read it in some pretty fundamental ways. It has, of course, been used as a justification for the subjugation and abuse of women, which is an absolute perversion of this text.

On the other hand, we do live in a society now, a kind of postmodern society, where all distinctions are broken down, where any distinctions are seen as problematic or oppressive.

And neither approach can really be supported by the text. And both, frankly, obscure the beauty and the brilliance of what Paul is actually saying here. Now, Ephesus was a patriarchal society, and there were various household codes that were already in circulation.

The Stoic philosophers, for example, had written instructions for how to order your home. And in this society, all these household codes strongly emphasized power dynamics in the home.

They were all about authority and obedience and keeping everybody in line. The paterfamilias, the male head of the house, had a very high degree and in some cases, absolute authority over the people in their home.

[ 13 : 42 ] They had a very high degree of authority over their wife, over the children, over the servants. They even had legal authority over people in their home. And women and children and servants were typically seen in society as being inferior, as being less than.

But then the gospel changed everything. Right? The gospel comes and says, all people are equal in the eyes of God. They have equal value. They have equal dignity.

They have equal worth. They're equally filled by and gifted by the Holy Spirit. And the example of Jesus Christ begins to turn hierarchies upside down.

As he says, the greatest among you shall be your servant. So you see, he's turning things upside down. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

He begins to turn things upside down. And so what Paul does here is to take a familiar form, the household code, and he subverts it.

[ 14 : 41 ] He shows what it looks like for the principle of Christ-centered mutual submission, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. And he shows how that begins to redefine all of these relationships.

Now some people criticized the early Christians and said, well now you're just, you're breaking everything down in society. There's going to be disorder. There's going to be chaos. And this is Paul's way of saying no, no, no.

But it does change everything. For example, he says that the husband is the head of the wife. Now you read that far and that would sound just like all of the other pagan household codes.

But then look how he defines what that means. See, pagan household codes might go on to talk about the importance for the husband to rule with a firm hand, to keep everybody under him in line. But there's no mention of that here. There's actually no mention of the word authority here. Because Jesus Christ has redefined what this means. So in a Christian marriage, being the head doesn't mean you get to make unilateral decisions.

[ 15 : 50 ] Right? Being a head doesn't mean that your wife stays home and you're the one who goes to work. Being the head doesn't mean that you're the one who manages the finances and she's the one who cooks.

Right? A Christian marriage, in a Christian marriage, playing this role means you're going out of your way to love and to cherish your wife.

That's what he says. To love and to nourish and to cherish your wife. It means, as he says, being so attuned to her needs that it is as though you are dealing with a part of your own body, that you're as familiar with and as attuned to her needs as you would be your own body.

And it means, as he says very clearly, a willingness to lay down your life, a willingness to pour yourself out for the sake of your wife to see her flourish. And the point we need to see here is there's nothing like that in the pagan household codes.

Jesus completely redefines these relationships. Right? So in a Christian marriage that is defined by mutual submission, the husband prioritizes his wife's well-being through his love and self-sacrifice for her.

[ 17 : 05 ] The wife prioritizes her husband's well-being through her respect and support for him. Now, it does not mean that we shouldn't all love and respect and support one another, right?

But there is wisdom, and this is why I come back to say, you know, the longer I've been married, the more I read this in a way that recognizes that there is deep wisdom that I need to hear.

And instead of getting bent out of shape about what Paul says to whom, I have benefited far more from simply reading it as a pastoral letter to me, giving me an opportunity to adjust the sails of my heart in ways that I might need to do for the sake of my marriage and my relationship with Christ.

Right? So, for example, if I'm not loving and prioritizing my wife's needs, I need to become aware of that.

Right? So, for example, if I'm expecting physical intimacy, but I'm not doing the work of making sure there is emotional intimacy, right, where she feels safe and cared for, if I'm out of touch with the mental load that she's carrying, you know, it's amazing.

[ 18 : 21 ] I will talk to the most radically militantly theologically egalitarian couples. You know, it's been 17 years of marriage and a lot of time spent counseling couples, running the whole spectrum from complementarian to egalitarian.

And I will meet with the most radically egalitarian people and still, almost always, the wife carries the massive majority of the mental load for the family. It's simply a reality.

Right? So, for instance, if I'm out of touch with the fact that my wife did all of the making of appointments, all of the buying of school supplies, and everything necessary for back to school, and I didn't even know the date of the first day of school.

Right? If I'm out of touch with what that's like for her, I need to adjust my sales. You know, that's not only going to hurt my relationship with her, it's, what this is saying is, that's going to hurt my relationship with Christ.

There's a disconnect there. Right? Or if I'm a wife and I go out with my friends and I spend the whole time complaining about my husband, that's not only going to hurt my relationship with him, that's going to hurt my relationship with Christ.

[ 19 : 41 ] Right? I need to adjust my sales. Right? So the point we need to see is, the way our hearts are aligned toward those people in our lives is connected to the way they're aligned with Christ.

If we want to be filled by the Holy Spirit, it's not just about our relationship with Jesus and how much we're praying, it's how am I orienting myself and aligning myself toward the people closest to me. We have another example here in parenting. Paul calls children to obey their parents and to honor them. And then he says to fathers, and this word could also be translated as parents, not to exasperate their children but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

And again, we have to appreciate how countercultural this was and is. In the ancient world, fathers had absolute authority over their children. They could be as harsh or abusive as they wanted and there was really no protection for the child in that case.

In our society, I would say, to a large degree, for probably most of us, the pendulum has swung pretty far in the opposite direction. So it's not uncommon, right?

[ 20 : 52 ] We do have abusive, controlling parents, absolutely, and some of us grew up in houses like that. So not saying it's not there, but it's also not uncommon to see parents who believe their role is to be highly responsive to their children's needs and their desires, but to provide little guidance or rule or discipline.

Right? Parents who sort of have this underlying assumption that children know what's best for them and that children should be free to make their own choices without much interference from their parents.

I remember growing up and when I was young, I remember a, beginning to watch the Nickelodeon channel. And it was like a new thing when we were young and what was new about it is that for the first time there was programming, you know, before that you had had shows with kids, but the parents were right.

The adults were generally good people, right? And they were doing the right thing in the lives of their children. And generally, it was the children who needed to learn the lessons. But the thing that was different about Nickelodeon is that Nickelodeon turned that upside down and all of a sudden you have a child-centered perspective and the children are the ones who are right and the parents are the ones who need correction.

Right? And it's been interesting to see a shift in how we as a culture think about parenting that really has gone very far in that direction. That our job as parents is to figure out how to get in line with and meet the needs of our children and let them guide themselves.

[ 22 : 19 ] And see, Christian parenting doesn't resemble either of these. It doesn't resemble the abusive patriarchal society that this was written in, nor does it resemble where we are now in the postmodern West. Children don't know what's best for them.

Simply put, they need parents who will not only love them and meet their needs, but guide them and prepare them for life as mature Christ-following adults.

And so, the instructions that Paul gives are different to parents than they are children. For Christian children, submission, in other words, ranking myself below, right, prioritize, that means obedience. Submission means putting aside what you think is best, obeying your parents in the Lord. Right? And it's very important that he says that. Obeying your parents, if you're a kid, obeying your parents is a way of obeying Jesus.

It's a way of obeying Jesus. It's about recognizing the role that God has given the parents that you have in your life. And it's about honoring the fact that even if your parents aren't perfect, and we know they're not.

[ 23 : 28 ] No parents are perfect. Even though your parents are far from perfect, God uses your parents most of the time. Now, there are outliers, there are cases of abuse and neglect and all of those things.

We're obviously not talking about those things. In most cases, with Christian parents and Christian children, obedience is about honoring the fact that even though your parents are imperfect, God uses them to form you into the people that he's created you to be.

that God works through your parents. For Christian parents, submission means putting aside what is most easy. It means putting aside what is most convenient, and it means doing the hard work of disciplining your children.

And that is extraordinarily hard. It is so much easier to just give in than it is to set limits and give consequences and hold your ground when they push back, which they will.

It is so much easier when you're exhausted at the end of the day, it is so much easier to veg out on your phone than to engage your child and to pray with them, to read Scripture with them, to have meaningful conversations with them.

[ 24 : 45 ] It's so much easier just to let them watch something on TV so that you can watch something on your phone because you're exhausted. And we've all been there and we all do it and we all get it. It is so much easier to stay home on Sundays than to bring your kids to church consistently because it's hard to come to church.

It's hard to come to Sunday school. It's hard to proactively find programs and opportunities that your kids can participate in that are going to form their faith. It is so much easier to take the path of least resistance because we all work full-time jobs, we're all stressed, we're all exhausted, the most important aspect of Christian parenting is not what you're signing them up for or even what you're doing with them.

It's what they see in you. It's what they see in your relationship with Jesus. What does mom look like when she's worried?

What does mom look like when she's stressed? What does dad do when he's angry? Right? It's not about being perfect, it's not about being sinless, absolutely. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

It means you're the kind of person who admits you're wrong. You're the kind of person who admits when you yelled and you shouldn't have yelled. It means you're the kind of person who's regularly, consistently coming back to Christ to give you what only Christ can give you.

[ 26 : 03 ] It means you're modeling repentance on a daily basis. Setting an example for your children is hard. It is so much easier to try to outsource it, right, to a program or to a ministry or something.

But this is the role that God has given you. And submission, in this case, means putting aside what is easy and expedient and doing the hard work of fulfilling that calling. When we do that, we align our hearts with Christ.

And then finally, he gives us the example of the workplace. He uses the language of bondservant or servant or even slave and master. Certainly, there was that and in many ways, this was, you know, it was not, it's not an institution that resembles what we think of as slavery on the one hand, but it's also not an institution that we want to have today in any way, shape, or form.

There were a lot of people for whom this was a way that they voluntarily entered into being a bondservant in order to try to make money and get an education and climb a ladder. And so, it was employment for many people in the ancient world.

And so, it is applicable, what he says is applicable to all of us who work and have bosses and jobs in some ways. So, for Christian employees, Paul says, submission means putting aside the temptation to do the bare minimum just because you don't like your boss.

[ 27 : 31 ] Right? It means putting aside the temptation to sort of fake it. Right? To phone it in. It means pouring ourselves into our work.

It means doing our work with integrity, doing our work with sincerity, working from the heart. And the reason is not necessarily because your boss deserves it. The reason is because there's somebody that you're working for other than your boss.

The true person that you're serving in your job is Jesus Christ himself. And so, he says, in everything that you do, work as though you were working for Christ himself because that's who you're working for.

And for Christian bosses, submission means putting aside the temptation to treat your employees unjustly, which may be cheaper for the company. Right?

Behaving in unethical ways may help your bottom line. Right? Expecting them to come in and work on the weekends. That may, you may need to get that project done and you may need them working all through the weekend to get it done and that might actually make you look better.

[ 28 : 38 ] But it means putting aside the temptation to abuse your power, to treat your employees unjustly. And very countercultural, very radical, it says, to all masters, to all bosses, to all employers, you need to lead your people knowing that one day Jesus is going to hold you accountable.

And when you stand before him, whatever distinctions you had here, master, bond servant, those don't matter to him. It says, with him there is no partiality and you will be held accountable for the way you treated those who worked for you.

So we want to pull all this together. I want to pull all of it together because I know it's a lot but we need to see the whole flow of the argument. You are, if you're a Christian, someone who now has access to the life of God and God's desire and promise is to fill you so that you radiate with the Holy Spirit so that it spills out of you into every aspect of your life.

God is going about the renewal of all things and he does that through spirit-filled people. If we want to participate in the life of God, we need to regularly ask ourselves, how do I need to adjust the sails of my heart?

Am I aligned with the heart and will of Christ? Am I regularly putting myself second? Am I regularly prioritizing the well-being of those around me? And of course, this will always be a work in progress.

[ 30 : 10 ] This will always be something that we do very imperfectly and we will fail as often or more than we succeed. So if you're sitting here right now feeling that tension as you think about your relationships, you're in good company.

We will fail more than we succeed. That raises one final question though. What happens if I'm in relationship with someone and I'm doing my best to prioritize their well-being but they don't reciprocate?

What do I do with that? And on the one hand, this passage clearly shows how wrong that is. It shows that even if your life feels greatly unfair, deeply unfair right now, in whatever relationship you're thinking of.

It means there is someone who sees that. I think chapter 6, verse 9 can be applied to the whole passage. Your master in heaven sees and with him there is no partiality.

So on the one hand, we have to recognize you can't control anyone else. You can't manage how they treat you. You can't manage how they think about you.

[ 31 : 24 ] You can't control. It's not you. You're crossing a boundary that you can't cross if you try to control and manage how another person treats you. If you try to manipulate them into doing what you want them to do, you can't do that.

The only person that you're responsible for is yourself. So you have to recognize that. You can only be responsible for your own heart and your own posture toward them. But you can take comfort in knowing that one day God will hold that person accountable if there are things they need to be held accountable for.

On the other hand, if you are in relationship with someone who you think is not reciprocating, you say, I'm doing all of this for them. I feel like I constantly put them first.

I've constantly put my stuff to the side. I'm constantly making sure they're okay. And they never reciprocate. They're just happy for me to do that. I feel like they're taking advantage of me. That happens. I know it happens.

On the other hand, there is someone who understands what that's like better than anyone else in existence. Jesus Christ knows better than anyone what it's like to lay his life down, to love and to serve people who refuse to love and serve him in return.

[ 32 : 37 ] In other words, he knows what it's like to love and serve people like me, people like us, but what we see in Jesus and what the gospel tells us is that that does not stop him from pouring his life out for us.

In fact, it's the very reason he does it. He knows the only thing that will ever change people like us, help us become more loving, help us become more serving, is for him to pour his life into ours.

And when you begin to realize the depth of Jesus' commitment to love you and to serve you and to become a servant for you, even in the face of your rebellion against him, that humbles you.

That softens your heart. It strengthens you to love and to serve others in your life, not for their sake necessarily, but for Jesus' sake.

As Christians, we are called to treat people not the way they treat us. We are not called to treat people the way they treat us. We are called to treat people the way Jesus treats us.

[ 33 : 50 ] Let's pray. Lord, may these truths in your Scripture do their work in us, and may your Spirit do in us what no mere words can do.

Lord, we desire to be your people, and that your mark would be on us, and that your life in us would be evident because our relationships look so different from the other kinds of relationships we see

in the world.

Lord, we long for the way we love one another as in marriage, Lord, in friendship, Lord, between parents and children, Lord, on ministry teams that we serve on, Lord, with our neighbors, Lord, in our workplace relationships, Lord, the way we respond to angry, unjust bosses, Lord, the way we respond to people who criticize us or mistreat us, Lord.

In all these ways, we pray that we would put your glory on display, and we pray that as we do this, we would open ourselves up to your Spirit, and then as we are filled by your Spirit, that that would become the motivation for us to do this even more.

We pray for more of your Spirit in us, Lord. Help us align the sails of our hearts to receive you fully. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.