

Living By The Spirit

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[0 : 00] Well, let me pray for us before we start.

Father, we just pray for tonight as we look at this passage that you might help us to understand it, in one sense not to let our own experiences and the culture determine how we think, but Lord, to hear from you.

And Lord, I pray that you will, especially for me, give me great wisdom and sensitivity in what I have to say. We pray this, Lord, for the sake of your Son, Jesus.

Amen. Well, we've got a handout as well if you're interested. Not very detailed, but hopefully it will help you keep track of where we are.

So we come to this passage in Ephesians chapter 5 and 15, second last week in Ephesians. And I guess I want to start by asking that, just by saying that so often in life, I think, we react and think about situations as a direct result of our own experiences in life.

[1 : 25] So some people hate pets. And when you ask why, you may find out, for example, that they were bitten when they were young by a dog.

As for me, I dislike eating whole fish. You know, the ones where you cook them with the skin and bones on them. A very Chinese way of doing it.

And the reason was that when I was young, I used to have to eat them. That's how mom cooked them. And sometimes I would find scales still on the skin. And once or twice, I actually swallowed a bone.

And so still thinking about this sends shivers down my spine. And so as a result, I hate eating fish whole. And I guess we all have strong reactions too, I think, when we come to the subject of submission in our passage tonight.

And in large part, it could be due to our own experiences. Some of us would have grown up in fiercely egalitarian environments where everyone was equal and treated the same, while others may have grown up in a more patriarchal environment where there was a male father figurehead.

[2 : 42] So whatever our experiences, some of us or most of us would either be reacting against them or else we'll be seeking to defend them based on, defend our views based on those experiences.

And this is particularly so, I think, when we come to that first section on husbands and wives. Because like it or not, we are caught up in society's gender wars. God created males and females to help one another.

But so often nowadays, all we hear about is the battle of the sexes, which in turn, I think, is a reaction to an earlier period where males dominated society and excluded females.

But as we try and understand these verses tonight, I think it's important that we allow the verses to interpret our experiences rather than the other way around.

Because God, this is God's word. And it sits above our experiences. Well, how do we do that? As with all Bible passages, I think the best way to understand a passage is to read it in its context.

[3 : 57] And in this case, it is to read it as part of the letter of the Ephesians to the Ephesians as a whole. And then in its immediate context, which is the verses just preceding it.

So let's first consider the entire context of Ephesians. And over the last month or two, we've been learning about God's plan for this world. And in our very first week, I would have mentioned that God's plan is centered on Christ.

So in chapter 1 and verses 9 to 10, I think we've got some verses up there, we find that his purpose is in Christ. And his purpose in Christ, when the times reached their fulfillment, was to bring all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

That is to bring all things in submission to Christ under his authority. And God does this for the church. And so we see in verse 22 of that same chapter that God placed all things under his feet, that's Christ's feet, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

And that verb placed in the Greek there is actually the same word that is used to try and translated to submit twice in our passage tonight. It means to bring all things under submission under Christ.

[5 : 19] And then in verse 10 of chapter 3, God, we find that God does this so that his manifold wisdom can be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

The church, in other words, is God's showcase to the world of this great wisdom. He's saying to all the rulers and authorities, if you want to know what good and godly rule looks like, then look at my son.

And if you want to look, you want to see how godly submission looks like, then look at my design for the church. And this is the picture of submission, I think, that we should have in mind when we come to our passage tonight.

So, for example, in verse 21, when Paul says, submit to one another in reverence for Christ, we are to remember the verses that came before. Secondly, as I said, it's also important to see what leads up to our passage tonight.

So, last week, we talked about what it means to walk the new life in Christ. And in verse 15 this week, Paul again reiterates the need to walk in Christ. This time, he talks about walking wise.

[6 : 31] So, verse 15, be very careful then how you live, or as translated, or walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity. Why?

Because the days are evil. The days are evil because we are living in a fallen society, which is given over to sensuality. And so, Paul wants us not to be foolish, not to follow the ways of the world, even though it may be popular to do so, but to understand the will of God and to submit to the mind of Christ.

And then in verse 18, Paul urges the Ephesians to be filled by the Spirit or with the Spirit. And he contrasts it with being drunk with wine.

So, we are to live under the Spirit's influence, as it were, not under the influence of alcohol, which leads to debauchery. And so, if they ever invented a breath test for the Holy Spirit, then our readings should come up way above the limit, you know, if we got pulled over by the cops and had to blow into it.

It should be .05 and over. Now, there's no such test, of course, and I doubt if they will ever invent one like that. So, that's why Paul then goes on to say that how we tell that we are filled by the Spirit or with the Spirit is through our actions.

[7 : 49] And in verses 19 to 21, he gives us a list of those actions. And so, they are speaking to one another with psalms, singing and making music, giving thanks to God, and submitting to one another.

Now, these are not separate to being filled with the Spirit, as the NIV translation seems to suggest because they break up the sentence. But they actually arise from being filled with the Spirit.

They show that God is working in us by the Spirit. So, living by the Spirit, walking the new life, being part of God's master plan, all of these require us to submit to one another in reverence to Christ, which is the last action out of that five.

Submission is a key part of the Christian life, which is why Paul then spends the next 21 verses expanding on it within the context of the Christian household.

So, what does it mean to submit? It is, I think, to put yourself willingly under the authority of another. And as a Christian, it is to recognize the leaders that God has put over us.

[9 : 02] Now, to submit is not to subjugate. That's leaders forcing submission on us. Rather, Paul is addressing those who are to submit. And so, he's asking them to do it willingly out of their love for Christ.

Now, sadly, we've seen leaders exploit submission. But submission to godly leadership isn't exploitation at all. And I know some people reject this notion of submission precisely because of this, precisely because they fear exploitation.

But the fact is, submission is necessary because leadership is necessary. They're actually just the flip side of the same coin. So, if you look around, you'll see that society cannot really function without leadership.

All organizations rely on good leadership. So, every soccer team needs a captain. Every school needs a principal. Every company is a CEO. But leaders are only as good as, as it were, their teams.

And the team's willingness to submit. And so, the question tonight is not whether there should be submission, but what that sort of submission looks like under God.

[10:19] And so, some people think that verse 21 means that everyone is to submit to everyone else as though there's no leaders.

But I don't think that that can be the case because of what I've just said. Rather, what Paul means is that we should be submitting to one another in accordance with the order, in terms of the structure of leadership that God has put in place.

So, when I'm in the church, I submit to leaders that are here, to Andrew as the lead pastor. But when I'm at home, or even when I'm in church, but I'm relating to my children, my children submit to me because that's my role as parents to them.

But Andrew does not submit to me in church, and I certainly don't submit to my children at home. But this doesn't take away our equality before God.

And it's very important for us to understand that we are still equally valuable to him. We enjoy the same blessings before him as we saw in chapter 1 of Ephesians, including being seated with Christ and saved by grace through faith.

[11:32] Submitting to authority doesn't make any one of us less important. And being a leader doesn't make that person more valuable to God than those they lead. So, an analogy of that could be, for example, our parliament.

So, all members of parliament are equal. They're elected by their constituents. They're answerable to them, hopefully. And every MP in the House has one vote.

But when the House is seating, there is also order. So, the Speaker has, in one sense, overall responsibility for what happens in the House. And even the Prime Minister has to answer to him or her when they are in the House.

And you can see that very clearly during question time. But once outside, the Speaker, again, is just like any other MP, one of the many.

And so, it is within the Christian household, where God creates order in order to benefit his people. It's intended as a blessing. And I think Paul focuses on the household because it's a natural extension of the church.

[12:45] It's where Christians live out a large part of their lives and where they have their most important relationships. And so, we have three sections there. Husbands and wives, which Paul deals with in verses 22 to 32.

And then in the next chapter, children and parents in the first four verses. And then slaves and masters in the remaining. Now, I just want to say a word about slaves and masters because there's probably no direct equivalent of that relationship in our day.

Not here in Australia, anyway. Some people have then taken it to mean as between employers and employees. But I don't think it's an exact parallel. Slaves in those days lived in the household of their masters.

And they had less freedoms and rights as we do as employees today. So, I think we can apply probably some principles from it.

But we have to be careful not to take it as an exact parallel. Now, it's taken me a while to get to this point, to talking about the verses from 21 onwards.

[13:49] But I think it's important that we have done that because we need to understand the context of the letters to the Ephesians and the preceding verses before we can understand the next 21 verses properly.

Now, if we were at a marriage course, I'll probably spend the next two hours on the next 12 verses. And then the further two on the four after that if we're in a parenting course.

But we're not there, so thankfully. So, what I just want to do is draw out some common points, which I think cuts across all three sections and therefore helps us to understand each.

And so, I have five points to be precise. First point, I want you to notice how Paul no longer addresses the entire church in this section. Instead, each section is specifically for one part of the household.

So, wives are to pay attention to verses 22 to 24. Husbands, to the few verses after that. And so, if you're neither a husband nor a wife, these verses actually don't apply to you directly.

[14:56] Although you can probably learn quite a few truths from it. And the same then applies for the verses about children and parents in chapter 6. Which means what we mustn't do is try to impose the verses that don't apply to us on others.

So, husbands are not to hold verses 22 and 24 against their wives. God isn't actually speaking to husbands in those verses and saying, Make sure your wife obeys them.

Alright? And neither is God saying to the wives, Make sure your husband loves you like Christ. So, I think first and foremost, each of us need to look at those verses that apply to us.

And we need to look at them regardless of what the other party in that relationship is doing and how well they're doing it. So, that's the first point.

The second is the fact that God is actually speaking directly to each of us in these verses. And again, I think that shows our equality before God.

[16:01] Everyone has a direct and personal relationship with Him. So, even children and slaves are being addressed directly. And that was a very radical thing in those days.

But God is saying, These people are just as important to me as those who lead. Third point is to notice that the instructions are not actually symmetrical.

That is, wives are called to submit, but notice that husbands are not called to lord it over them.

Children are asked to obey, but fathers are not asked again to lord it over them.

And the same with masters, who are asked to treat slaves like God treats all of us, rewarding good work. Now, why is that? Is it because husbands, fathers and masters don't have a responsibility to lead?

No. But I think what God is trying to make clear here is the manner in which they are to lead. So, husbands lead by loving their wives, because that's how Christ led the church, by giving himself up for her, verse 25, and saving her through his death.

[17:16] It's servant leadership. So, whenever we make choices in marriage, husbands need to consider not what is convenient or comfortable for himself, but actually what is more helpful and important for his wife, her physical well-being, her emotional and spiritual well-being.

We husbands are not to put our needs before theirs. Christ gave himself up for the church, verse 26, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.

Here, I think commentators are referring to the bridal bath, which brides used to perform before their marriage. But Paul uses this as a symbol to describe the cleansing of the church by the gospel, making her holy before God.

Paul then goes on to say in verse 27 that the end result is so that Christ may present her to himself a radiant church, without stain and wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

And he then applies it to the church, sorry, to husbands and wives. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wives loves himself.

[18:34] After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ the church, for we are members of his body. Now, this same way that Paul talks about, I don't think implies that a husband cleanses the wife like Christ the church.

Rather, the same way is for the husband to follow Christ's attitude of love, to treat his wife like he treats his own body, loving her as much as his body, if not more.

Similarly, when we get to fathers and children, fathers are not to exasperate their children, verse 4 of chapter 6, which I have to say, and my daughters are here, is a very easy thing to do.

But we ask to bring them up in the teaching and instructions of the Lord. Again, the father's aim, or the parent's aim, is for the good of the child, not for his own needs.

Not because, and we instruct them, not because they've inconvenienced us or brought shame or disgrace on us, but because we want to bring them up in the way of the Lord.

[19:43] And essentially, that's what leadership is all about. It's about bringing the best out of the person you are leading. For Christ, that's his church, holy and blameless. For husbands, that's your wives.

For fathers, with mothers helping, that's your children. For masters, it's about enabling your slaves to do good work. Godly leadership is never about the leader, his ego, or her desires, or insecurities. And start with leaders. But then when we get to wives, children, and slaves, then in response, what they are to do is to help their leaders to achieve those aims.

They are to allow their leaders to bring out the best in them. That is, don't hinder them in their leadership. And I think, in essence, that's what godly submission is all about.

Fourthly, let us notice how, in all instances, we are to live as to the Lord, and relate as to the Lord. So, in other words, God has appointed leaders as his agents, and so we are to relate to them as though God or Jesus was in that position or in place of that person.

[21 : 04] So, wives are to submit as you do to the Lord, verse 22. Children are to obey, verse 1 of chapter 6, in the Lord. And slaves are to serve wholeheartedly as if serving the Lord.

And on the other hand, husbands, fathers, and masters are to conduct themselves as though they were doing exactly what the Lord Jesus would do in that position.

Hence, they are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. And fathers are to bring up, and that word bring up there is actually the same word as feed, in verse 29.

So, fathers are to feed as Christ fed the church. That is, I think, what in the Lord means. And so, it may include discipline, but it is never to the point of exasperation because that is not what God would do.

That is not how God deals with us as his children. And the same then goes for those between masters and slaves. In other words, God exercises his rule over us by giving us leaders.

[22 : 16] Now, of course, when we look at our husbands and our wives, they are far from what God and Jesus are like. But I think despite all their failings, we are to submit to them out of a fear for Christ.

Even if our husbands and fathers don't deserve our submission, Jesus does. God does. Now, of course, that doesn't mean it extends to sinning against God.

I mean, we have a higher authority which is God and Jesus. But anyone who answers, I answer to no one but God is actually answering neither to God as well.

Now, I know that for some of us, this is going to be really hard. We may have been part of or may still be part of difficult, broken marriages and families where there has been abuse or violence.

And if that's the case, there are other factors that we need to be sensitive to. So don't think that I mean that we just slavishly obey these verses even in those situations.

[23 : 24] But I think for the large majority of us, hopefully, for the rest of us, we mustn't be too quick to dismiss these instructions just because the other party in that relationship is imperfect.

Rather, let's pray that God will help us to rise above each other's imperfections so that our relationships can be strengthened and blessed through this instead of stooping or going to the lowest common denominator as in if he's imperfect and therefore I wouldn't try and be perfect either.

And in that case, we're just on a downward spiral, aren't we? And fifth and last, I think Paul urges us to all do this because our human relationships reflect profoundly our relationships with God.

That is, God uses our human relationships to give a world and insight into the spiritual relationships that he has. And this goes back to what I was talking about in the context of the whole letter of Ephesians.

He uses the relationships in the earthly realm as a shadow of what is happening in the heavenly realms. This is the profound mystery that Paul explains in verses 30 to 33.

[24 : 44] And he makes this startling claim. So he's quoting from Genesis chapter 2. He says, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

And then he goes on to say that this is a profound mystery because I'm talking about Christ and his church. So it's clear from Genesis 2 that the two becoming one flesh is a reference to Adam and Eve, a man and a woman.

But here Paul is referring with these verses to Christ and his church. Christ and the church are one flesh. And this was foreshadowed back in Genesis 2 in that first marriage and in every marriage ever since.

So the most intimate union in all creation, that between Christ and his church, marriage between the divine and the human, between God and man, it's amazing as it is miraculous.

God now uses marriage as a pattern for that amazing and marvelous plan that he has. God uses the most intimate of human relationships to give us a glimpse of that most intimate of heavenly relationship.

