

God Gives Roles

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[0 : 00] Well friends, let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word.

Father, we thank you for your son who is your living word. We thank you for your son who delighted to do your will. And Father, we pray that we might be like him, that we might also delight to do your will.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, Stephen Bidolph is one of Australia's best known psychologists. And he has a special interest in the study of manhood.

He's written a number of books on the topic. A recent one, one just recently come out. Stephen Bidolph tells the story of the ideal man of 50 years ago. He says he was tough, uncomplaining, gentle with animals, kind toward women and children.

I don't know if it's in that order or not. Ferocious in protecting the ideal of female sensitivities. He was the honourable man, a protective husband and father.

[1 : 12] And then he describes how this sort of model man of the 50s perhaps, has been denigrated and recast since those days. That man is now understood to be a patriarchal beast.

A man who has dominated his family. Abusive, overpowering. A bully who uses his power for his own gain. A man lacking in tenderness.

Devoid of sensitivity. Driven by that dreadful hormone, which is now almost a swear word. You know, that's it. Testosterone. But it's not just men.

You see, women too in that period of time, or perhaps even over a much larger period of time, a century, have seen enormous change. 100 years ago, the main purpose in life for a woman was to get married and to look after her husband and children.

And they were treated, rightly or wrongly, as second-class citizens with few rights. A life consisted of back-breaking household work without electricity, without household aids.

[2 : 17] It was intensive labour that had no rest. And then came the 20th century. Now, the economist of September 1999 called the 20th century the female century.

In Australia, the first few years of this century gave a glimmer of what was coming when women were given the right to vote. And as the century progressed, their rights became more and more prominent.

Large numbers of women, for example, began to enter the workforce during the war and then continued to work salaried positions after the war. Technology began to modernise lifestyle and altered domestic life forever and domestic roles forever.

The oral contraceptive enabled women to pick and choose about pregnancy and having children in a way previously unimagined anywhere in history. It also enabled them to have greater freedom and flexibility in relationships and in long-term planning of their lives.

The women's liberation movement began to grow rapidly. Some focused on gaining equality for women in work and politics. Others paid attention to meeting the specific health and safety needs of women.

[3 : 25] And the role of women in Australia dramatically and significantly changed. Equal access, equal pay, paid childcare, shelter from abusive husbands and men, laws for equal opportunity, encouragement to study in male-dominated fields, access to appointment to significant positions of power in government, business and organisations until, of course, we can now have a woman Prime Minister, the possibility of being a working woman in a life uninterrupted by childbirth and child-rearing.

Friends, the world we live in, it's hard for many of us to understand, is a very dramatically changed world. And in that world, it is no longer straightforward being a man.

And it is no longer straightforward being a woman. And it is not clear what it means to be a wife and a mother. And it's not unclear what it means to be a husband and a father. That is the world that we live in these days.

Now, the world that Paul lived in was somewhat different from that. There was nothing unclear about roles in one sense in that world. Men dominated the landscape of the ancient world. Women were lesser beings, were defined by the men in their lives.

They were largely limited by men as to what they could and could not do and the freedom that they could enjoy. The man that dominated their lifestyle might be a father, it might be a husband, but it was definitely a man.

[4 : 54] In Roman society, women were not allowed to write or to be active in politics, so we don't even have many of their stories because they couldn't write. In some societies, they were regarded as impure and their bodily functions made them dangerous for a man who wanted to maintain his religious purity.

In other societies, there was a little more freedom and there were cases of women running their own businesses and having careers, and you see some of these in the New Testament, in fact, or of wealthy widows who are independent of men.

However, such were quite rare. The general public role of women was clear in the ancient world. They were to be subject to men. They were largely restricted to traditional roles in household.

They were to manage households. They were to be dignified wives and mothers and to rear children. Friends, that is the world that Paul lived in. It is a world far removed from the other world that I described to you earlier on.

And the question is, the questions that are raised by these are powerful and poignant questions. And the question is this, can those two worlds meet?

[6 : 00] That is, can the world in which Paul lived and worked in and ministered in meet the new world that we live in? Does that ancient word that God gave to Paul and addressed to that ancient world, does it have anything to say to us?

Is it relevant? And if it is, then what relevance can this word have for us? And particularly, what relevance does it have for us in this world where the roles of men and women have changed so dramatically?

Friends, those are the questions posed by this passage. And Jono gave me chapter 5, verse 21 to 6, verse 9, and that's impossible to do tonight. So I'm only going to look at the one on men and women, although I'll give you a picture of how to understand the other.

Before we start, I wonder if I could state my main premise. My main premise is this. I believe that this word on the lips of Paul, or in the pen of Paul, if you like, is a word from God.

It is an authoritative word. It is spoken into the ancient world that Paul lived in, and it still speaks to us in the modern world in which we live. And we need to grapple with this word, and we need to seriously seek to understand it, and only when we do will we see its relevance for us.

[7 : 21] So, friends, I want to warn you that I'm going to work you hard tonight. You see, this is a tricky issue, and this passage demands some solid work. So you need to have your Bibles open, and you need to be prepared to work hard.

So let's get underway. So Ephesians 5, verse 21. But I want to put the passage in its larger context for us tonight. First, there is the context of the whole Bible.

You see, the issue of men and women in life and in marriage is one of the very first issues addressed in the Bible.

Genesis 1, verses 26 and 27 is very clear. It says that men and women were created equal before God. When God makes human beings, He makes them male and female, and He gives them joint rule over His world.

There is no hint that they are unequal in their status before God or their access to God. There is no essential difference between them in terms of their relationship with God.

[8 : 22] So in verse 27, So God created human beings in His own image. In the image of God, He created them. Male and female, He created them. There's no hint of inequality there.

However, in Genesis 2, even before the fall, it is apparent that there are distinctions in roles. There also appears to be an order in the way that God creates.

And the order is God, the man, the woman, and then the inanimate, inanimate world. There are many indicators of that order within the text.

And we don't have time. We have to wait for a sermon on Genesis 2 to have a look at all of that because we're not concentrating on Genesis 2 tonight. What I can say, however, when we look at the detail, it is clear that there is order.

What I can say is that a fall, the fall in Genesis 3, amounts to a reversal of that order. Because what happens? Remember what happens? The animate world in the shape of a serpent seizes the initiative.

[9 : 23] The woman then gives food to the man, gives to the man, and he eats. And that action is such that God's role as the one who guides human existence is reversed. First, humans become the determiners of what is good and bad for them.

And God ends up being the judge and punisher rather than the benevolent present person in the garden. That's how the Bible begins. So the Bible's already telling you heaps about men and women before you get to the end of the first three chapters.

It begins with a God-ordained order, and as far as I can see, that is not changed anywhere in the Old Testament. The general tenor of the Old Testament is that men and women are equal before God.

Husband and wife are no different before God in terms of their status. However, the husband is in a stronger position of authority within marriage, and the wife is in a weaker position of authority within marriage.

So with that in mind, let's now turn to Ephesians. So turn in your Bibles to Ephesians. We are going to get there to chapter 5 eventually, but let me just do some background work. I want to say that in my view, Ephesians is all about oneness in Christ.

[10 : 31] We've seen this from the very beginning. You see, from the very beginning of the book, Paul makes it clear that God has chosen Jews as his agents in bringing salvation to the whole world.

However, his goal was to blow apart the distinctions between Jew and Gentile. His intention, you see, in his world was to break down what he calls the dividing wall of hostility between these two.

That's what Paul says God was about. And we saw it in chapter 2. Jews are still Jews in chapter 2. Gentiles are still Gentiles. But God has made them into one new humanity.

They are now one together in Christ. As Ephesians chapter 4 verse 4 says, there is now one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

All are related in Christ and stand before him with equal status, Jew and Gentile alike. Now, friends, please understand me.

[11 : 29] Ephesians is very clear. This does not mean that there are no differences or distinctions. No, there are still people who have foundational gifts of being apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor teachers.

They still have the gifts of God that equip God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ will be built up and become mature. All are equal in Christ. But there are different gifts and there are different roles in God's church.

And that's even so within Ephesians. Now let's turn to the immediate context of this passage. So open your Bibles at Ephesians 5 verse 18 to 21. And I want you to notice what Paul says.

You see, in the immediately preceding verses, he's told the Ephesians from verse 6 to 18, from verse 15 on, he said, don't be foolish, but be wise.

And then he goes on to say, well, look, the days are evil. Therefore, make the most of the time. And the best way to do this is to do the sorts of things that are in verse 17. You're to avoid being foolish by comprehending or understanding the will of God.

[12 : 31] And then in verse 18, he explains some more about what it is to be wise. He says, being wise is, well, not being drunk with wine, but to be wise is actually to be filled with the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit will often be characterized by four things.

Do you notice them there? Speaking to one another, singing and making music from your hearts. These are not the things you would normally consider to be wise, would they? But they are. That's what's being said here.

Giving thanks to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. There are four wise things to do in God's world.

Now that brings us to verse 21. And verse 21 really belongs with verses 18 to 20. You see, it ends that section. I think it's not beginning the next section. It's ending the last section. In other words, there should not be a full stop at the end of verse 20 and a heading and a new sentence like we have in the NRSV.

No, there should be a comma between verses 20 and 21. Verse 21 belongs to 18 to 20. It forms a bridge to the next section, but it introduces the next section, but it belongs to the previous one.

[13 : 40] So let's have a look at what it says. Now the NRSV has these words in verse 21. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Now let me tell you a little bit about this sentence.

First, look at the end of the sentence. The word for reverence is actually the word fear. And that gives the sense of it. Paul's urging people to act out of reverence or fear for Christ.

It's not just respect for Christ. It is reverence or fear for him. Second, I want you to look at the first half of the sentence. You see, Paul talks about submitting to one another.

Now what does that mean? I mean, lots of people seem to think that it says that every Christian should submit to every other Christian in every area of life. Well, even logically, that is sheer nonsense.

If I came up to my friend Mary and said, Mary, I submit to you, then what does that mean? It means that I'm saying I'm doing the submitting so Mary can do the exercising of leadership and authority.

[14 : 39] Now if Mary then says to me, well, Andrew, I submit to you, it becomes meaningless, doesn't it? Because it cannot work. It just simply cannot make sense. It would create an incredible mess with no one exercising any sort of authority because they're all submitting to each other.

And that's not the picture we get within the Bible, friends. That is not what is meant here. What is meant here is that in situations that follow, there's to be submission. As Paul goes on to describe three situations, there's to be submission within those situations.

And submission means there must also be an exercise of authority, doesn't it? Because you're submitting to an authority. That's what submission's about. And what this passage will go on to do is to tell us how this works in three key areas of life.

And Stephen's now going to put up a table for us. And I hope you can read it. Okay, there is the, from chapter 5, verse 22, through to chapter 6, verse 9, I want you to notice a few things about it.

First, there are three pairs. Can you see that? Wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters. Second, the person in a weaker position of authority is addressed.

[15 : 50] Then, the person in the stronger position of authority is addressed. Third thing to notice, every person is ultimately responsible directly to the Lord.

And that's said all the way through the passage. They're responsible to God. Fourth, I want you to notice that there is no hint anywhere in any of these passages that the person who is in the stronger position of authority is to be submissive to the person who is in the weaker position of authority.

No hint at all. Husbands are not told to submit to their wives. Parents are not told to submit to their children. Those of you who have got children will be very grateful for that.

Although later in life, it does sort of tend to change a little. And masters are not told to submit to their slaves. Now, that confirms what I've said about verse 21, doesn't it? It's not quite mutual submission.

So there's the overview. Now, I'm sorry, this has taken us a long time just to get to here and you're thinking how long is it going to take to get through the rest? However, I've been working up to this point and what I want to do now is go through the broad detail of this passage.

[16 : 55] So please, let's have a look at it. Verse 22 to 24, Paul says, Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the saviour.

Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be in everything to their husbands. Now, the command for wives is to be subject.

To be subject means to submit to someone and what Paul is saying, you can't dodge it, Paul is saying that a wife is to submit to her husband as to the Lord.

The reason that a wife is to submit to her husband is very clear in this passage. He is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. Now, friends, that does not mean that a husband is superior to his wife.

It does not mean that the wife is superior to her husband. It simply means that there is a positional power given by God to the husband. He is given a role of power because of his position.

[18 : 01] Verses 22 to 24 are very clear. God has given Christ to the church as head. The church submits to his headship and benefits from it.

So too, God has designed a Christian wife to benefit from submission to the headship of a husband. This is God's order which was designed to enhance her well-being, not suppress her, not demean her, but to enhance her well-being.

Now, I want to stop there just for a minute as it were and take a closer look at the last part of verse 24. Have a look at it there. Look at what Paul says. He says that wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

Now, this cannot mean to submit to things that are not God's will, can it? because nowhere in Scripture does God require humans to submit to the authority of humans when they demand something against God's will.

A Christian wife never has to submit to a husband who asks her to do sinful things. She never has to submit to sinful abuse of her. Now, I wonder if I might make just one more observation about this verse.

[19 : 15] Sorry, no, we'll move on to verse 25. Paul now addresses Christian husbands. Now, Christian wives got three verses. Do a quick count, see how many Christian husbands get.

They get nine verses. Now, the weight of this passage, I reckon, makes things very clear, just the way it's structured. The weight of responsibility is on the man's response to Christ's love.

Christian men need to take account of how much attention God gives to this matter. He gives heaps. I reckon the way Christian men think, you'd actually think there were nine verses for women and three for men, but it's not that way.

It is the other way around, and the words to listen to are the very first ones. If you're a man here, look at them, read them, imbibe them, take them on board, repeat them to yourself all the time, and live them.

Husbands, love your wives. Six times, Paul will push the word love in these verses. He will push it and push it and push it and push it home. Husbands, love your wives.

[20 : 25] Friends, the love being talked about here is the love Christ has for his church, the love that drove him to the cross. It is a love that does not love because of merit.

It is a love that extends even to the undeserving. It is unconditional. It has a goal, the highest good of the one loved. It is not self-serving. It is sacrificial. It is not primarily an emotion.

It is rather an act of will, a choice to love. It is a decision to care for, to watch over, to act in the best interests of someone, to serve their highest good, to have the highest good of the person loved at the primary focus of your existence.

And it has a model, and that model is Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ who so loved his church that he gave himself for her. He took the initiative. He handed himself over. His life was never taken from him.

He gave it. It was not demanded of him by his father. He willingly handed it over to him. It was done for the benefit and advantage of the church.

[21 : 29] It was for her. She and her good was the focus of his interest, his attention, his desire, his all.

His intention was to die for her and to set her aside, to act in such a way that what was absolutely the best for her would be hers.

That is to be related to him in splendor, purity, and holiness. Christ is all for his wife. He is everything for her. He alone prepares her.

He alone presents her. He alone receives all her glory and splendor. And that is how husbands should love their wives. Their wives are to have their exclusive attention.

And that attention is to mimic the sacrificial love of Christ for his church. And that's what verses 25 to 27 mean. Now look at 28 to 31 or 32.

[22 : 24] Paul says, In the same way husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies, he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body or no one ever hates his own body but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it just as Christ does for the church because we are members of his body.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery and I'm applying it to Christ and the church. Now friends, let me see if I can summarise what's being said here.

These are very tricky verses in some ways. Paul is saying that the Lord Jesus nurtures and takes care of the church because we are members of his body. We are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and husbands are to be the same.

No human in their right mind ever hates their own flesh. You see, because, let's see, most of you have done your hair when you came here.

Most of you have made sure that you're adequately dressed. Most of you and even the men here have done it. Hard to believe at times but even the men have done this, you see. They've cared for themselves. They've looked after themselves and that is what humans do.

[23 : 40] They nourish and care for their bodies. Husbands should do the same for their wives. That is, they should love, care for, protect, nurture their wives even as they do their own bodies.

But what about, what does verses 31 and 32 mean? What do they mean? Well, here's a suggestion for you. Paul has looked at husbands and wives and he's thought about what husbands and wives are all about and he's seen how close that union is between a husband and wife and he knows that that's in the Old Testament.

He knows from Genesis how close the union of a husband and a wife is and so he takes that union and he uses it to understand the relationship between Christ and the church and he says the mystery of it all is that Christ is both, that the church is both part of Christ and separate from Christ.

On the one hand the church is Christ's bride and therefore part of him. On the other hand the church is so closely connected with him that he's the head of the church, the saviour of the church and therefore he constitutes its unity and that's just like what's seen in a marriage between a man and a woman.

Now friends, we are seriously short of time and I still have things to say so let's now, let me show you verse 33. Now verse 33, it simply looks, doesn't it, like a restatement of the passage.

[24 : 55] However, I want you to notice the word respect. Can you see it there in the NRSV? The word respect. The word translated respect here is the same word that was translated reverence in verse 21.

Now that puts an entirely different shape on things I think. Can you see that there? A woman's told to reverence or fear, a wife is told to reverence or fear her husband.

Now, no wonder the translators sort of water it down a little bit. Can you see what's being said? In verse 21, Paul tells Christians to submit to one another out of reverence or fear for Christ.

And here he says to Christian wives what that means in practice. That is, they are to submit to their husbands with fear. Now, friends, that is not the fear of a slave. No, it's the fear of one who has been given authority by God.

the fear of one, the fear of the person who's been commanded by God to love her sacrificially. That that sort of love will cast out any cowering fear.

[26 : 00] It will turn and embrace such love because what woman does not want a man that loves her as Christ has loved the church?

If we could have men loving their wives as Christ loved the church, you could fear that sort of love an awful lot, couldn't you? You could reverence it and love it and want it to be exalted.

Now, friends, I want to turn to examine briefly what Paul does not say in this passage. First, there is no hint anywhere that husbands and wives are unequal before God.

If you haven't got this yet, you haven't been listening, there's no hint anywhere in Paul. Paul does not give any hint that husbands and wives are unequal before God.

Paul does not give any hint that there's no partnership or mutuality between a husband and a wife. No. In fact, in such places, 1 Corinthians 7, husbands and wives have equal rights over their partner's body.

[26 : 57] They're sexual, they're conjugal rights, they have equal rights. Second, this verse does not say, husbands, be head over your wife and demand that she submit.

It doesn't say that. The husband's duty before God is not to coerce his wife into submission. It is to love her. That's his role.

That's his role. That's what he's got to be concerned with, not saying, I want you to do this, I want you to do that, you must, no, no, no, no, no, biblically. It is his role to love his wife.

And the passage does not say, wives, you only have to submit when your husband loves you like Christ loves the church. No, the wife's duty before God is to submit to her husband.

Third, I want you to notice that there's no sense here in which the husband's headship is fundamentally about making decisions. Please understand that. I don't think while it may involve making decisions, that's not what's fundamental about it.

[27 : 58] 1 Corinthians 7 also puts paid to this. In 1 Corinthians 7, the decision about having sex or not is an entirely mutual one. And it's the only place I can find in the New Testament where husband and wife make a decision about anything together that we can see and examine.

It's about whether they have sex with each other. And unless both parties can agree, it seems as though the status quo remains. Now, being head is about leadership and initiative. The husband is the leader.

And he is the leader in the sense of being the slave of the wife's best interests. He is the leader in service. He is the leader in Christ-like sacrifice. He is the leader in loving as Christ loved the church.

Friends, please hear me. Many of us have deeply drunk from pagan models of leadership. And that view is that leadership is all about commanding and ruling.

No. No. This is transforming. It is about leadership in service. It is about being willing to lay down your life for another person.

[29 : 04] It is about not being served, but serving and giving your life as a ransom for many. It is about being like the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what headship is about in the New Testament.

Now, let me finally turn and briefly look at the relevance that this has for us. Friends, first let me return to where we started. Remember where I said we talk about our world and Paul's world and God's word.

Friends, God's word here to us I think is counter-cultural. And I believe it was counter-cultural in a different way, admittedly, in the first century. But there are hints, there are no hints here that it does not stand today.

There are no hints I can find that says this word no longer has to be obeyed in our world. Friends, everything here in this passage is consistent with what God says everywhere else in scripture.

It agrees with the rest of scripture. It is consistent with the rest of scripture. It flows freely and easily from the previous revelation on this topic given in scripture. And that is where my problem is with many of the modern discussions of this topic.

[30 : 16] Much modern discussion does not agree with the whole thrust of scripture. It is not consistent with the rest of scripture. It is as though you get to the New Testament and one or two verses and you say, these actually differ with everything else that is said all the way through up until this point.

Now, scripture has always asserted the equality of men and women, husbands and wives. But in my view, scripture has also always asserted there's a difference in roles in marriage and I think scripture has always asserted that the risk for men, as so many men do in our world, is that they abuse that authority and that they use it in an un-Christ like manner and some people here will have suffered from that and I am sorry if men have done that.

But when they have done that, when they have abused, when they have abused their role, when they have not acted as Christians, they have not been acting as Christ would or as Christ has commanded.

now friends, let me just talk about some practical things. What does this mean in practice? Let me suggest four applications. First, if you're married, then I urge you to listen to Paul's advice.

The context of the passage says it all. Do you remember? That's what I went through from verse 15 on. Do you want to be wise? Do you want to make the most of your time in these evil days?

[31 : 46] Are you filled with the Spirit? And do you want to live in a way filled with the Spirit? If so, then you'll live your marriage as Paul has outlined in this passage. Wives, will you submit to your husbands as to the Lord?

And husbands, will you sacrificially love your wife as Christ sacrificially loved the church? And will you help other men to do that as well? And will you women help other women to do that as well?

Let me turn now to those of you who are single and looking forward to marriage. Here's my hints. What relevance does this have for you? Well, if you're a woman, the sort of man outlined in this passage would be a good catch.

Right? He would be the sort of man you should look for. So look for them now. See what they are doing now. They are not the handsome ones necessarily.

Look for the one who is keen to be Christ-like. by the way, if you want some advice, what I found in a parish before is that your mothers always know who they are.

[32 : 53] And they don't look for the ones who are handsome quite often. They look for the ones who are godly. The Christian mothers know who they are because they observe and they've observed them from childhood. They know them.

Look for the one who is keen to be Christ-like. look for the one who just leads in sacrificial and Christ-like ways in everything that he does. Look for the one who is like Jesus in these ways outside of marriage.

And if you're a man, this is the sort of woman you should look for, the one who freely and easily submits to the Lord Jesus and the one who loves the Lord Jesus and his commands.

And when you find her, no matter what she looks like, she's good. She's Christ-like. She's a good wife because she loves Jesus and she wants to submit to him.

Next, let me turn to those of you who are single and not looking forward to marriage at all. What relevance does this have for you? Well, it tells you what you should be like. You should be keen to follow Jesus obediently and sacrificially in every area of life.

[34 : 02] Be subject to Christ. Love like Christ. Be sacrificially oriented like Christ. Be other person centered like Christ. Have no other goal in life but to be like the Lord Jesus.

And finally, what relevance does this have for men and women in general? Well, friends, take this on board. We are all equal before God. And God has given us various roles and positions in life.

And if God has given you authority anywhere in any place in life, then exercise it willingly and sacrificially as the Lord Jesus did, no matter what it is.

And if God has given you any place where you are in a lower position of authority, then exercise that position of submission as Christ did, who when he found himself in human form, willingly submitted to his parents and willingly submitted to the overarching rule of God and became obedient even to death, even death on a cross.

Christ never found submission demeaning. No, the rite of Hebrews says he delighted to do God's will and to live in submission to God's word. He loved it.

[35 : 17] It wasn't demeaning, it was enriching. So let's pray together. Father, please help us. please help us to be like this picture painted here.

And Father, please, please forgive us as you have promised that you will. Please forgive us men who have abused our authority so terribly, either in marriage or elsewhere.

Please forgive the abuse, either psychological or physical. people. Please forgive us for not being like the Lord Jesus. And Father, for those who are women here, please forgive those who have not acted according to your word in this area as well, and who have sought to usurp people's authority or a husband's authority.

Father, please, please help us in this area, particularly help us in this world that is so set against this way of living. Help us to be determined to be wise, to be determined to be filled with your spirit and to live according to your word.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.