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National Presbyterian Church

Ephesians: Christian Marriage

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through July and August we are looking at a book in the Bible called Ephesians. It's a short letter, written by the Apostle Paul the greatest missionary of the early church – written to Christians in and around the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) somewhere within 25-35 years or so, after Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Last week in Ephesians Chapter 4 plus the beginning of 5, we looked at the challenge that Paul laid on every Christian to change their way of life, to keep growing in Christian character because of the message of Christ's salvation.

To Paul, this message of salvation was not just about forgiveness and going to heaven when we die but was also a message about Jesus' passion and power to change our lives right here and now, to begin to recreate and restore in us his image, so we grow to become like Christ.

So Jesus promises not only to love us and claim us as his own, but to come and live inside us powerfully by his Spirit giving us the internal power – the fuel, the energy to enable us to keep on growing in character as long as we live.

None of this growth, though, he says, is automatic.

Last week we focused on the fact that this spiritual growth – growth in character – comes only as we commit ourselves to develop practical habits (like being with other Christians) that can unleash God's power within us.

And when we do that, not only will we see our internal character change and grow, but we'll see our external relationships change as well – changes for the better in all kinds of relationships and institutions in life in which we're often stuck, confused, or in pain. And it's this thought about change in relationships (not just in individuals) that brings us to our passage today from Ephesians 5 and 6.

In Ephesians 5 and 6 Paul begins to focus on the transformative power of Jesus – his love, his example, his teaching, His Spirit – in our relationships. That is:

- in our places of work: (he speaks about slaves and masters)
- in our families: (he speaks about children and parents)
- and in our marriages: (he speaks re husbands and wives).

And as he does this – as Paul moves on to speak about our relationships in various situations, he quite unintentionally and sadly (from my perspective!) – manages to stir up a hornets' nest of issues that have turned people against him for centuries, and especially in the past century. In the past 100 years, Paul has been accused of hating women (misogyny), believing in the servile obedience of wives to their husbands, writing as if he were soft on slavery – as if slavery was somehow a divinely ordained institution. The press on Paul has been really bad! Though as you

might guess I, for one, don't believe the accusations are fair but I'm not too sure I can show that in only 15-20 minutes!

So, in our limited time this morning, this is what I want to do.

- In a few moments -- I'd like to speak about *one aspect of marriage mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 5* – one that has been controversial – the roles of men and women/husbands and wives (with a reminder that at other times I've spoken re the Biblical vision of marriage -- and you can find these messages on the web)
- But before we get there (to marriage), I'd like to pave the way and set the scene by speaking *both about slavery and also about the nature of the Bible!*

So: this is the order: Bible, Slavery, Marriage, That's where we're going

1. AND we'll start with the Bible.

Obviously since we're in a Presbyterian church, I'm a Presbyterian pastor! And every Presbyterian pastor, elder, and deacon – in our ordination affirms this, that:

“The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word to me.”

In other words, what I believe is this: that this book, the Bible (no matter how easy or hard to understand its contents), is God's book, God's inspired book, and I'm not free to ignore it—even when it's hard. BUT having said that: what I also believe is that while the Bible is God's Book, it is also very human (in some ways like Jesus: *fully divine; fully human*), and that we have a commission from God to read and study it carefully in the light of its human context (not just its divine context).

In fact the Presbyterian Confession of 1967 (see www.creeds.net) describes the situation really well when it says this (italics mine):

The Scriptures, *given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit*, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current.

The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world, and in every form of human culture.

This is what I believe! And this is critical to remember when it comes to understanding the Biblical view of “hot topics” – like slavery, and Christian marriage.

So, for example, when it comes to slavery: Yes! It's true: Paul never states categorically that slavery is evil (nor, by the way does Jesus) or that what-slave-owners-need-to-do is to free their slaves. And for some critics of the Bible, this is unconscionable! Because this absence of condemnation could be seen, and *has* been seen, as divine justification for the institution of slavery itself!

And I have to admit: I wish it were different!

I wish Jesus and Paul had been blunt! So that no Christian would ever have been a slave-owner! And the scandal of slavery among Christians in our own nation might never have

been! (tho' let me add that in Rome, in the time when Paul was writing, slavery was never linked to race and the horror of racism as it was in our country: it crossed all racial lines, and some slaves wielded significant political power – the institution is not uniform historically).

But this is not what we get in the Bible. Though, on the other hand, it's not as if we get nothing!

What I mean is this: while it's true that neither Paul (nor Jesus) state categorically that slavery is evil or set out to overturn the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire they did set out to do something! What they set out to do was to undermine slavery:

- to change the content of the institution
- to change the internal relationships within the institution
- so that it began to lose its power.

AND, historically speaking, this was actually a pretty wise course of action. Remember, this was an age where there was no democracy; where if you resisted the power of Rome, you died – as Jesus did. You had to pick your battles. You had to choose where you were subtle and where you were up front.

This “undermining” is what we see Paul doing, for example, most clearly in the short letter Paul wrote to a slave-owning friend called Philemon, in which Paul tells Philemon to look on a run-away slave called Onesimus as if he were not a slave at all, but a “brother in Christ.” -- A “brother in Christ”? Once you truly see your slave as a genuine brother, then the institution can never quite be the same again!

True! This is NOT a final solution to slavery, but in a world without democracy, where might is right, it's a beginning: an *under-mining from within*.

And this is what also we see Paul doing in our passage in Ephesians where he speaks about the relationship between slaves and their owners!

When Paul speaks about slavery in Ephesians 6, he begins by telling slaves to keep obeying their masters – as if Christian faith changed very little; as if he was justifying the awful institution. In fact, he tells the slaves to obey their masters even more readily than they would if they weren't followers of Christ, because even in slavery (he says) they were first of all slaves of Christ, and in the judgment, God would reward them.

Ephesians 6:5-7 – Slaves: obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, in the same way as you obey Christ; ⁶not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

So this is the word to the slaves, and it seems to be pretty weak as a critique or an undermining of the institution. BUT when it comes to the masters – in a few short words the heat turns up, and the message becomes stunning!

All the slave owners in the congregation at Ephesus would have listened to Paul's words to the slaves. And what they would have heard there was this: that ultimately their slaves really didn't belong to them at all, but to Jesus: they were “slaves of Christ!” Not their “owner's” property but Christ's!

“Slaves of Christ.” And that simple title changes things radically!

- Who's going to mess with or terrorize what belongs to Christ?

- Especially if God is a judge!

And that's exactly what Paul says next: everyone is accountable to God, *including the owners*. Judgment is coming and the owners don't get a break: instead they just get the deadly warning from Paul that they too have a master-owner: God! And one day that master-owner will be their judge!

And this master-owner- judge isn't swayed at all or impressed by human wealth or power or social standing. So he says in 6:9 –

Masters -- do the same to them. [DR: in other words: treat your slaves as you would treat Jesus himself!] Stop threatening your slaves: for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with God -- there is no partiality.

God isn't impressed with, and doesn't cave in to, money or power.

God only cares about the way we treat our fellow "slaves of Christ"!

Well, of course -- some Christian owners heard this and acted on it and either freed their slaves, or transformed the institution into a different kind of working relationship

Others, though, as we know throughout history, missed it! And to the shame and disgrace of the church, justified slavery as biblical, even in its most brutal forms.

Though the purpose of Paul was clear:

In the Roman world in which slavery was everywhere, and in which democracy was a pipe dream, and no one but the Emperor had the right to change the rules of the game, Paul's approach was not to repeal the institution but to undermine it from within, by calling Christians to change the way that they used both their powerlessness and their power.

AND HE DOES THE SAME THING WITH MARRIAGE turning upside down the cultural assumptions and roles of both women and men.

People, by the way, in condemning Paul, often forget that compared to Jesus Paul does quite well in bringing women into leadership!!

- In Jesus' inner circle there were no women: (outer circle: yes!) the 12 disciples were all men.
- But Paul on the other hand, had at least three prominent women (and I think many more) in leadership in the churches he established and visited: Junia in Rome – whom he calls an apostle (Romans 16:7), Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18:2-26) – who taught theology to a man called Apollos (the greatest orator in the early church), and Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16) – who was the first convert and leader in Europe.

Despite this, though: despite this openness to women in leadership, Paul gets a really bad press, largely because of the way people translate and read passages like our passage today which mentions the role of women or wives in marriage!

So this is what he says in Ephesians 5 (this is my translation from the original Greek)

^{5:22}Wives act in the same way with your own husbands as you would with the Lord.

²³For the husband is the head of the wife, [but only] in the same way that Christ is the head of the church: saving the church as if it were his own body.

²⁴So, in the very same way that the church is subject to Christ, wives should also act in everything, with their husbands.

Now I have to admit that for many people hearing this in the western world in the 21st century, you might think at the least that this this was pretty dated and that, at the most, it was oppressive

Wives act in the same way with your own husbands as you would with the Lord.
²³For the husband is the head of the wife, mmmmm!!

BUT, if we stop for a moment and remember the nature of the Bible, and pay attention to the context (both historical and literary, as the Confession of 1967 urges), then some really valuable lessons emerge. Not just for women – but especially for men!

The first thing to notice is this – that the controlling statement for this whole section of Scripture about wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and owners is verse 5:21; “Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.”

This is a verse in which Paul is speaking to every Christian (not just women, but men) in every station of life (slave and free) saying that the model for our behavior and our relationships is Jesus’ own willingness to take the form of a servant in all his relationships, to wash his disciples’ feet, to let go of his own will, and be subject to the will of his Father, even to the point of being willing to give his life away by dying on a cross for your sake and mine: doing whatever it takes to seek our good.

This is the model for relationships that every single one of us should follow – whether male or female, young or old, rich or poor, married or single: to be a servant (a “slave of Christ?”); to be subject to the will of God and to one another. Is that your goal? Your ambition??

So what the role of verse 21 means is this: that when Paul goes on to speak about wives being subject to their husbands (acting like a servant), he’s already told husbands that this is their standard too: to be subject to their wives too – to act like a servant with the one closest to them.

And anyone who has seen a happy marriage knows this is the key:

- The big question, the over-riding question that drives a happy marriage, for both husband and wife, is precisely this:
 - Not “Who’s the boss?”
 - But “Who’s the servant?”
- And when that’s missing in a marriage from one spouse or the other, or both, then the sad spiral downhill almost inevitably begins.

It’s a hard lesson – and usually one that is harder for men to grasp than for women (which is probably why the section for husbands in Ephesians 5 is over twice as long as his admonition to wives!!). In other words, for the men Paul has to spell out what subjection and servanthood look like in detail.

²⁵Husbands – (here’s how you can put into practice verse 21 and be subject to and serve your wives!): love your wives, in the same way that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. [DR: “gave himself up”: This is the same word used in the Gospels to describe Jesus being given up or handed over to be crucified, to be put to death, Luke 24:7]

²⁶ [this is what Jesus did] in order to make the church holy, by cleansing the church with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, becoming

holy and without blemish. [so we, the members of the church, could be beautiful]

²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but nourishes and tenderly cares for it, -- just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body.

In other words, If Christ loves us by serving us and nourishing and tenderly caring for us – soul and body, seeking our best, and treating us as if we were his spouse – then, says Paul: Christ expects *no less subjection from husbands with their wives!*

AND the reaction when both men and women in Ephesus read that?

Well! They must have been stunned.

They lived in a world in which men could treat women like property—in any way they wanted. And here was Paul radically under-mining this way of life; lifting up the dignity of women and down-playing the power of men, bringing everyone’s behavior under the standard set by Christ – the standard mentioned in the controlling verse, 5:23: “*Be subject to one another –out of reverence for Christ.*” That is, become servants of one another in response to who Christ is and what he’s done, and how he did it.

Last week, at the Monthly Men’s breakfast, one of our Wycliffe Bible Translator missionaries, Stuart Showalter, was the speaker, and he spoke about the power of the Bible to change lives and cultures, sharing what he had seen in his own experience in his 30 years in Africa.

One example he gave, remarkably, was about the transformative power of this very passage. This is what he said:

Another way that the coming of the Word of God upset the community was in how it began to affect marriages.

Among the Kaan people in Burkino Fasa in Africa, all women are to be submissive to men. A man may take as many wives as he can support. It’s fairly common for a man to have two wives, and occasionally you’ll find someone with more than that. While a woman is strictly forbidden from committing adultery, a man may have mistresses without any punishment – it’s not even considered adultery. In Kaansa, the normal word for adultery only refers to the wife’s behavior not the husband’s.

As the church began to teach about Christian marriage, the words that became radically dangerous (to the status quo) were these: “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*”

We were at one of the early Christian weddings, and the pastor took rope and wrapped it around the bride and groom as a symbol that they were now one flesh: one person. He preached about how the men love to quote Ephesians 5:22: “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*” But for the Kaan, this was nothing new – Kaan culture already told women to submit to men.

The really new and radical part was verse 25: that husbands were to actually love their wives and sacrifice themselves for their wives, in the same way that Christ sacrificed himself for the church.

And the teaching about being one flesh was radical too. In traditional marriages among the Kaan, it's considered manly to dominate, even beat your wife.

So when the pagan families of the bride and groom who were attending the wedding heard this teaching, they were astonished. This was dangerous for the status quo! What!? A man could only have one wife? And he had to sacrifice his own interests for her well-being? What kind of marriage is that?

In fact after that Christian wedding, the Kaan pastors were surprised to get some visits by Non-Christian single young women to ask them to match them up with Christian men. They'd heard the teaching in Ephesians 5 not as oppressive but as liberating!! It was liberating to know that a husband and wife were bound together for life as "one flesh", and liberating to hear the teaching about husbands loving their wives and working sacrificially for their spiritual well-being – and they loved it! It was so different from what they expected out of their traditional culture. -- What they wanted was to be a part of a community that was animated by the Spirit of love and grace, where love and grace was to be practiced even in the home.

And this is the point: Christ by his Spirit gives us the power to become servants of one another, if we'll let him. Just as Jesus became a servant, in fact a slave, for us, subjecting himself to the will of the Father for you and me! And he calls us, and, Paul argues, holds us to account, to follow his example: turning the world upside down by becoming not only his servants, but servants of one another in every relationship and institution of life in which we find ourselves.

Listen, my Friends, whoever you are:
“Be subject to one another – out of reverence for Christ!”

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800