

## Healthy Homes

### [Ephesians 5:21-6:9](#)

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Sunday, November 26, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

"Be submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ." If you read this text without the phrases that relate to Jesus, the Christ, then the text means a whole different kind of message. "Be subject to one another... wives be subject to your husbands... husbands love your wives... children obey your parents... fathers don't provoke your children... slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling... masters stop threatening your slaves." But it doesn't read that way. Every phrase of imperative to each set of people is connected to a phrase that immediately puts them into the Lordship... the Kingship of Jesus, the Christ. "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ... wives be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord... husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church... children obey your parents in the Lord... fathers do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the disciplined instruction of the Lord... slaves obey your earthly masters, as you obey Christ... masters, remember that you have a Master in heaven." Every command is connected to the important senior leadership of Jesus, the Christ, who is the exalted Lord. What I believe is happening here is a reframing of values in light of the kingdom of God and the presence of Almighty God in Jesus Christ.

Today we recognize the end of the Church year. Next week we celebrate the beginning of the Church year in Advent—anticipating the coming of Jesus. Today we celebrate the end of the Church year as Christ is Lord and King over all. It is in that context that we understand this text. This is not workable unless Jesus is Lord; unless Jesus is King; unless every person who believes in Jesus is submitting to Jesus as Lord and King of their lives. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ... submit yourselves to one another out of fear of the Messiah... serve one another as you bow in worship of Christ today... be slaves to one another in honor of the One who is the servant of all—Jesus—who became the Master and the King. This whole ethos of how we care for one another and defer to one another is a major theme in the New Testament. In different parts of the letters you will find phrases like 'honor one another;' 'accept one another;' 'agree with one another;' 'look out for one another;' 'have equal concern for one another;' 'serve one another;' 'carry one another's burdens;' 'bear with one another;' 'look to the interests of each other;' 'teach one another;' 'admonish one another;' 'spur one another on to good actions;' 'love one another and pray for one another.' The whole spirit of New Testament relationships is: because Jesus is Lord and King, we ought to have a high value for the humanity of every person connected to Christ and every person who lives in this world. That is a unique definition of ethics in terms of societal relationships.

The overall theme of Ephesians is: get rid of the wall of hostility between people who are not connecting to each other. The apostle puts three groups of people here today that have often had walls of hostility in the history of the Greek and Roman cultures: husbands and wives—walls of hostility; children and parents (particularly children and fathers)—walls of hostility; slaves and masters—walls of hostility (and today I'd put it in the context of bosses and employees). The Apostle Paul calls people who follow Jesus to a new ethic: because you are willing to serve Jesus, serve your fellow human beings. Bow before those who around you in the church and see them as opportunities to treat them with high honor and respect. This whole pattern of Jesus coming into a world and making himself a slave is a part of the Gospel—that Jesus would not hold onto the power in heaven but would empty himself of that power, become like a slave, and walk the earth with human beings...and humble himself, even to the point of death, even death on a cross (the words of Paul in Philippians, chapter two.) It is important that we see the other human beings around us as people that are there for us to serve; for us to attend to and listen to; to care for and watch over.

The story of little Phillip and his grandfather at the Thanksgiving dinner with the big family; granddad had the wisdom of words at the right moment. They had a custom at the end of the meal of taking the turkey wishbone and having the oldest and the youngest break it. Whoever got the largest portion of it would have their wish granted. So there they were, young Phillip and granddad, pulling on this wishbone and breaking it apart. Phillip was bitterly disappointed when he saw that granddad had the biggest portion and he knew that granddad would get his wish. But granddad said the right thing, smiling at Phillip: "That's alright my boy. My wish is that you would get your wish." A sense of deferring to the other person and the other person's interests... of coming to the place of being in the same place with the other person, even though they may be of different age or different stature.

I visited some friends several years back who had an only child—a daughter—and she was about four years of age. I walked in the door. She had never seen me before; she looked at me and began to hide behind her parents and whisper and say: "He's too big. I'm afraid of him. Does he have to stay?" They invited me into the house and she kind of hid from me most of the evening. As the evening was going on she began to play on the floor by herself. I decided to get down on the floor with her. Well, her eyes got kind of big. And as I was down lying on the floor there, she got a big smile on her face. She jumped on top of me and she said: "You're now my mine! I'm in charge. I'm not afraid of you anymore." And she began to ask her parents if I could stay longer and play. What happened there? It's the action of becoming a part of another person's world; of an adult getting into the context of where a child lives—at the level at which she sees reality and becoming lower than who she is. I learned something important about this passage of submitting yourself to one another—even to a little child. And that is that pattern that the Apostle Paul calls for in the life of the Church. "Out of reverence for who Jesus, the Christ, is place yourself as a servant to the people, no matter who they are, around you. It was a statement against an old system of everything carefully defined by patriarchy or matriarchy or power—to a new system of being in the family of a loving Father, with a sibling like Jesus, who is the chief Servant in the family.

Thanksgiving pattern in the Icenogle home over the years, I'm sad to say, was not quite like that. I can remember all too many years when my mother would work for days to prepare for the meal and do all of the preparation. She would serve the meal to sometimes 25 to 30 people in the family and she would then start to clean up after the meal while many of us, as the men of the family, sat around, watched television, and slept. I'm sad to say that that wasn't a great demonstration of mutual submission in a Christian family. Christ's coming to the earth was the final demonstration of all time that Jesus would become one of us; and not just one of

us, but become a servant among us and lay down his life for each one of us. It is a 'wave effect' that the apostle is addressing here: when we accept that kind of servant Lord into our heart, when we decide to follow Jesus as Lord, we take on the servant spirit. And that servant spirit begins to permeate every relationship that we have. We begin to submit ourselves to one another out of reverence for the Great One who is the slave of all. There's a rippling effect that goes out from who we are to our immediate relationships between husbands and wives; and friends; between parents and children; between employees and bosses; and ripples out into the rest of the world—where Christians show what it means to be submissive to one another and demonstrate a counterculture in the Kingdom of God.

Those four rippling circles here, of concentric impact, reflect that whole new ethic and pattern of life: that mutual submission would be among all of the people in the church. Mutual submission would be between all husbands and wives in faith. Mutual submission would be among all fathers and children. Mutual submission would be between all masters and slaves. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"—all of the relationships defined and reframed by a transformed understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God. A bilateral submission by voluntary unilateral acts in a world that often demands submission by some to others—the weaker to the stronger; the smaller to the larger; the lesser to the greater; the low to the high; the people to the ruler; the female to the male; the younger to the older; the wife to the husband; the children to the parents; the demand of the culture for submission—whether you like it or not.

That is not the way of Jesus. Everything in the kingdom of God, after the pattern of Jesus, is by voluntary choice and consent. This statement is not a demand placed upon the Church whether you like it or not. It is a call to the Church to put your life into a pattern like Jesus has—not called to control one another but to serve one another in serving Jesus Christ. To initiate a new culture in a world where power is abused and used to oppress people. This whole theme of fear and reverence here is a reframing of the term: submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, not out of fear for the parents... or fear for leaders...or fear for kings... but out of fear for Jesus. A softening attitude; because, when you know Jesus, your fear is no longer the fear of hurt and the fear of the demand; it is the invitation to give yourself as a servant. It is turning fear into mutual respect. And why? It is because Jesus himself practiced that. Jesus himself emptied himself of all things and became submissive to what human beings wanted to do to him, because of his choice to save us. And so the call of God is for us to practice the same.

There's a caution here: please do not misuse this text. Do not give-in to the temptation to miss the irony of the text in relationship to some typical cultural assumptions. Let us not interpret the text like the typical Greco-Roman person would interpret it, or traditional Hebrews might interpret it. This is not a new kind of captivity in the name of Jesus. This is a very careful description of life together of freedom in the service of Jesus. As one commentator said: "It revitalizes—even terminates—the original and universal relationships and patterns of the old family in Israel, Rome, and Greece. It is a call not to resurrect hell on earth, but to bring heaven down to earth through the servant relationships in marriage, family, and work. It is a new culture defined by the Kingdom of God."

So it says: stop the acts of control and become servants; stop the coercion...the manipulation... the capriciousness... the demeaning and devaluing of other human beings... and become like Jesus, who loved people and laid down his life for them. Follow a master in Jesus who honors and addresses even the slaves. Mutual submission means paying attention...getting into the arena where the other person is...understanding their language, and their thoughts, and their culture... listening carefully... choosing to defer to their agenda... attending to their concerns... looking out for their good... understanding their framework, their acts.

I would say it would be a pretty significant affirmation to say that Washington, DC is not known as a city of mutual submission. Instead we are, unfortunately, known as a city of many focused agendas where I want you to do what I need to have done. With personal constituency expectations... with party mandates... with leadership leverage... hard advocacy actions... broken-record assertiveness... aggressive attacks... and defensive maneuvers—the opposite of the Kingdom of God. Stephen Covey said in his book, "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," "Seek first to understand the other person and then be the person who is seeking to be understood." Honor the other person higher than yourself.

The situation in Ephesus was that women were not treated well. Children were treated with even less esteem and slaves with even less. And so the Apostle Paul is saying: take those who are treated so poorly and treat them with great dignity and honor in Jesus Christ. This is how you practice the new faith. Rodney Stark, in his book, "The Rise of Christianity," says that Christianity was unusually appealing to women within the Christian subculture; they enjoyed higher status than they did in the Greco-Roman culture. For example, in the Athenian law, a woman was classified as a child, regardless of age, and therefore was the legal property of some man at all stages of her life. The Gospel liberates the women, the children, and the slaves. And what you do with liberated people who go outside the bounds of their life calls? You call them back to doing the right thing in the name of Jesus: of being in mutual submission because they love Jesus; of being willing to obey a parent because they love Jesus; being willing to obey a master because they love Jesus. The oppression is removed. Voluntary assent becomes the culture.

And so it is that this text is about how we honor each and every human being who names the name of Jesus, and how each and every human being who names the name of Jesus honors every other human being, no matter what age, or what role, or what status. Marriage is seen in that context as an opportunity for mutual service. Parenting and family is seen as a context for mutual affirmation and service. Slave and master is seen as a context for mutual support and to remove all threat and intimidation.

It is important today that we do not bow to the culture in which we live; that we do not allow the patterns of hierarchy, and power, and control, to be our primary boundaries for life together. It is important that we see Jesus as the primary power in every relationship; and that every person, no matter how much official power they have, is called to respect and honor the other human being (and they may not have any official power). That is the new ethic of the Kingdom of God. That is the pattern of life that we are being invited to practice today. It is only possible because Jesus is the King and we are all subjects of the King. Therefore, we are all here to serve one another with grace and love, to bear one another's burdens, and to respect the love that God has for each human being. Let us use that well here in the church... in our homes... in our businesses... wherever Christians can practice being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you are King, you are Lord, and we are your servants. You have shown us the way of service. We have heard your word; and so call us to a life of mutual submission— of serving one another out of reverence for you. And so we commit ourselves to that, in the power of your Spirit. Amen.