

Ephesians 5:21-31

²¹ ...and by submitting to one another in reverence for Christ.

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he himself is the Savior. ²⁴Moreover, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, in the same way as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word. ²⁷He did this so that he could present her to himself as a glorious church, having no stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but so that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸In the same way, husbands have an obligation to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹To be sure, no one has ever hated his own body, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. ³¹“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh.”

...by Submitting...

I.

You will have noticed something unusual as today's sermon text was read. It began with an ellipsis; that's those three little dots. The definition of ellipsis is “the omission of words from speech or writing.” When quoting something, an ellipsis is often used in order to skip a few words to make the part of the quotation actually being referred to more clear. *Starting* with an ellipsis signals that something is being left out that came before.

It might serve us well to look back at what came before so that we can put today's sermon text in its proper context. Last week's theme was “Make the Most of Your Time.” After discussing the differences between wisdom and foolishness Paul explained the *how* of making the most of your time.

He started with the phrase: “Be filled with the Spirit...” (Ephesians 5:18, EHV) but, of course, he didn't stop there—something more was coming. “...by speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (singing and making music with your hearts to the Lord)...” (Ephesians 5:19, EHV). He wasn't done yet. “...by always giving thanks for everything to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20, EHV).

At the end of last week's reading we could have included an ellipsis, because the sentence in the original Greek and Paul's thought process didn't end there. There was yet another part to “being filled with the Spirit.” That final part is the beginning of *today's* reading. “... and by submitting to one another in reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21, EHV). Submitting to one another, in other words, is part of spirit-filled living. It's part of making the most of your time.

II.

This Letter to the Ephesians was written to a rather mixed congregation. It was made up of both converts from Judaism to Christianity and converts from other religions to Christianity.

As the letter was read to the congregation you can almost see the heads nodding in agreement with the concept that being filled with the Spirit involved worship with one another and giving thanks to God for everything. Giving thanks, we said last week, includes things so ordinary we often don't give them much thought, as well as some things we don't really *want* to give thanks for. Perhaps they skimmed right by that on the first read.

But then they got to this “submitting to one another” bit. Were they a bit perplexed, or did they think that didn't sound like a bad idea? Submitting to one another is the umbrella over everything that follows.

In Luther's Small Catechism there is a series of recitations called the “Table of Duties.” Those who had me for Catechism classes had to recite these in both 7th and 8th grade catechism classes. I had to recite them in *my* Catechism classes, too. Perhaps many of the rest of you did, too. Much

of the wording for the recitations for Husbands, Wives, Parents, Children, Employees, and Employers came from this section of Ephesians. All of these things in the table of duties are part of “submitting to one another in reverence for Christ.”

Deep in the Table of Duties, Paul says: “Slaves, obey your human masters with respect and reverence, and with a sincere heart, just as you obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5, EHV). Paul isn’t endorsing the institution of slavery, he was just noting that Christian people might find themselves in that position. Luther uses this section to speak of employees. Most of us have a boss, and we should work in our position for that boss as if we were working for Christ himself.

Still further on, Paul wrote: “And masters, do the same for your slaves. Do not threaten them, because you know that the one who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and with him there is no favoritism” (Ephesians 6:9, EHV).

Can you see the Ephesians scratching their heads in perplexity after Paul’s Table of Duties? This submitting business was complex. Masters or employers were to have the same submission to their slaves or employees as employees were to have for their employers.

The whole concept of mutual submission is important for Paul’s discussion of husbands and wives that makes up the bulk of our text today. “Be filled with the Spirit... ²¹ by submitting to one another in reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:18, 21, EHV). Submitting to one another is the umbrella over all that follows.

Even Jesus submitted to the Father’s will. He told his disciples: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28, EHV). Sometimes he explained that to them in dramatic fashion. He washed the disciples’ feet, against the protests of Peter. The mutual submission we show others comes from Jesus’ self-sacrificing love for us.

III.

While Paul would later get to parents and children, employees and employers, in today’s reading he deals with husbands and wives under this umbrella of mutual submission.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he himself is the Savior. ²⁴Moreover, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:22-24, EHV). Embedded in Paul’s explanation of how the wife is to submit to her husband is the way believers think of Jesus. We know what Jesus Christ did for us. He willingly gave up all the glories of heaven to be born as an infant in Bethlehem. He lived his whole life without ever sinning—not even once. Then he was falsely accused and sentenced to die on a cross. The fact is that Jesus’ life was not taken from him on that cross, he willingly sacrificed his life so that you and I could be declared righteous and holy before the throne of God.

The back story of what Jesus did for the Church makes it completely reasonable that Christians would be willing to submit ourselves to the One who did everything for us.

Often these words to wives have been misused. Feminists have used them to say that the Bible is misogynist—in other words, that the Bible promotes hatred of women or that it is demeaning of women. Male-dominated societies have used this passage to claim that men have a right to rule over women and keep them subjugated.

Perhaps those in Ephesus might have been thinking just that when they heard these words of Paul for the first time. They might have been anticipating what Paul would say next. He was about to tell them how important it was for husbands to rule over their wives—to *make* them submit. Wrong.

“Husbands, love your wives, in the same way as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word. ²⁷He did this so that he could present her to himself as a glorious church, having no stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but so that she would be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27, EHV). Again, Paul embeds Jesus and his love for the church into an exhortation for husbands to love their

wives. Jesus gave himself up for his Church—he loved us to death—his own death. Then he made individual people into believers by washing us in water connected with the Word of God—in other words, Baptism. He did it all so that you and I can appear before God in heaven without one stain or wrinkle or any other flaw; not one sin is left unpaid-for to mar our record before God. Jesus loved each of us that much.

That is how much a husband is to love his wife. A tall order. An impossible task.

“In the same way, husbands have an obligation to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹To be sure, no one has ever hated his own body, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones” (Ephesians 5:28-30, EHV). Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships. Did you notice that word “obligation” in there? The husband is to love his wife as his own body. “He who loves his wife loves himself,” Paul says. One could say the converse is true: if a husband hates his wife, or does not hold her in the highest regard, he must be showing that he hates or loathes himself.

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31, EHV). If you were following along with this reading in the pew Bible, you noticed a footnote. Paul is quoting Genesis 2:24. Way back in the Garden of Eden God designed marriage with the husband as the spiritual leader of the family. Adam failed to lead well when he let Eve talk to the snake, even though he himself wasn’t deceived by what was going on. For good reason many women have been disappointed when their husbands fail to be the spiritual leaders God intended them to be.

IV.

Back to the beginning of today’s reading with its ellipsis. In fact, let’s include the part that the ellipsis refers to: “Be filled with the Spirit... ²¹ by submitting to one another in reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:18, 21, EHV).

There’s the umbrella for the whole Table of Duties—for employees and employers, for parents and children, and in our text, for husbands and wives. Mutual submission. Believers willingly submit to one another because we are all members of Christ’s body.

Both husbands and wives are committed to follow Jesus, relying on his love and forgiveness and power. When Paul uses the words “submitting” and “love” he uses the present tense. In the Greek that indicates an ongoing action, not something that is done once and is over with.

There are no conditional clauses in any of what Paul says. Wives are not free to stop submitting if their husbands fail to love them as Christ loved the Church. If they were, every wife would have an easy out, since no husband will ever live up to Jesus’ example. Husbands are not free to stop loving their wives if the wife doesn’t submit the way the husband thinks she ought to. His love for her is to be as unconditional as Jesus’ love for the Church was and is. These heavenly guidelines are for life.

These are God’s guidelines for every spouse. This is how God created us to live and how he calls us to live in Christ as new creations. In spite of our weaknesses, Christian couples try to—and do—live according to God’s will for their marriage.

If you are not married, remember that Paul never was married, either. Remember that submitting is the umbrella for our love and concern for other believers—and even unbelievers—in the whole Table of Duties. Submitting to one another means showing Christian love and concern for others, whatever station of life you find yourself in.

God grant you the attitude of mutual submission as conduct yourself in marriage, and in every area of life. Amen.