

Submission as God's Idea

Ephesians

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Let us remain standing tonight and open God's word to Ephesians 5, Ephesians 5 as we continue with our study through this letter of Paul to the church at Ephesus. Our text tonight as you know we've worked verse by verse through these last several verses, and our verse tonight is verse 21. Ephesians 5:21, but we will read the whole paragraph beginning with verse 15. People of God, this is the word of our God. Ephesians 5:15,

15 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Thus ends the reading of God's holy word.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we're grateful for your word. As we approach your word tonight, we do not approach it as any book, Father, we humble ourselves under your word and its authority and we ask that you by your Spirit would instruct our hearts and may you mold our thinking so that our thoughts will be thought after you for your glory and for our good. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

You may be seated.

By way of reminder, this paragraph found in verses 15 through 21 which we read a moment ago, is Paul providing us a final paragraph. It is a summarizing exhortation to the church of God regarding everything that he has had to talk about ever since chapter 4, verse 1. Chapter 4, verse 1 was that transitioning point in the book of Ephesians where he says we are to walk worthy of our calling. So he now ever since we have left that phrase, to walk worthy of our calling, he now comes to this what we could call a summary

climax in verses 15 through 21, and as we've seen over these past several weeks, the controlling imperative before us is Paul's command in verse 18 to be filled with the Spirit, and as we're called to walk as he has said here even in this present evil age, we're called to have the Spirit of God be that dominating presence, that controlling influence and driving force of our lives, indeed, we're to be filled with the Spirit. It is best understood through the lens of Colossians 3 where we're told let the word of God dwell in you richly. To be filled with the Spirit of God is to let the word of God dwell in you richly.

We are in continual need of this filling which is the reason last week we saw how this very nicely comports with the Apostle Peter when he writes in 1 Peter 2 and 3 that we need the sustenance of his word so much that we are to crave for it, we are to long for it like a newborn baby longs for milk and craves milk. It was as though Paul and Peter, we saw, it's as if these two apostles were inspired by the same Spirit. Indeed, they were. Indeed, brethren, it is the Holy Spirit that speaks to us. You see, it's not just Paul that has a message and that Peter has a message and they just happen to comport with one another. No, the reason they comport is they're coming from the same ultimate author, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it's the Spirit that tells you and me you never can overestimate the value and the importance of the word for vital growth in the Christian life, indeed, crave for it like a newborn does milk.

But what is expected to happen when somebody is truly filled with the Spirit? What results issue forth from one who has this Spirit infilling? Well, Paul provides us five dependent participles that follow this command to be filled with the Spirit. We have been looking at each of these participles over the past several weeks and we find that these five dependent participles provide for us the result of the Spirit's infilling, what it looks like to be Spirit-filled, and he begins with speaking, number 1. 2. With singing. The third participle was making melody. The fourth, giving of thanks. Then the fifth which we find ourselves at this evening, submitting. Now the first three of those concern the matter of singing which we have considered carefully; we also have given attention to verse 20 of the giving of thanks; and then tonight in verse 21, we have our final participle which Paul writes, "submitting to one another in the fear of God." There are three things that we need to concentrate our attention on tonight. First of all, divinely ordered relationships; secondly, submission within divinely ordered relationships; and then thirdly, motivation for submission in these divinely ordered relationships.

First, let's just consider divinely ordered relationships. We find in our text this word "submit," indeed, this is a word especially in our modern context over which there is much confusion and we don't want to be informed by the mold that this world would have us fit our thinking into, we want to be informed by God's word as to what this word "submit" means. Now, historically this word in terms of its use originally was used in the area of military service. Perhaps it's not surprising to find Paul using military language because we get to chapter 6 of Ephesians and we've got this armory and all this type of military language that is included there as well. But "submit" literally means "to line up under." To line up under. So used in military service, submission is a soldier's lining himself up under the authority of his General. The concept of the word "submit," then,

assumes the existence of two parties, one party under which another lines up, and another party who does the lining up under. There is a party to whom submission is rendered and there is a party that renders the submission, therefore, the term "submission" may be applied not only within the context of military service but to any ordered relationship involving a person in a position of authority to whom another person renders submission to that authority.

In Scripture, we find that there are such relationships that are divinely ordered relationships that involve this concept of submission. One, for instance, is citizens. We find in 1 Peter 2, Romans 13, Titus 3, and other places citizens are in a position of submission in their divinely ordered relationship to governing authorities. What about church members? Church members are in a position of submission in their divinely ordered relationship to the authority of elders. We also find in Scripture three others that we find here actually following our text which is verses 22 and following, which is where we're going next in Ephesians, this whole household code beginning with verse 22 where wives are in a position of submission in their divinely ordered relationship to their husbands; bond-servants in a position of submission in their divinely ordered relationship to their masters; then children in a position of submission in their divinely ordered relationship to their parents. So it's important to note that when Paul writes, "submitting to one another," he is not speaking in some generic generality about possessing mere humility. Let me say that again: when he writes, "submitting to one another," he is not talking about submitting one's self to other persons in some generic way just by being humble and practicing humility.

Now while certainly elsewhere in Scripture we're told to not do anything of selfish ambition or conceit but in all humility we are to count others more significant than ourselves, now such an instruction is not conveyed using the concept of submission. In fact, there has been some who have attempted to grossly abuse the Scriptures through interpreting this phrase in this blanket statement of mutual submission so as to argue that we ought to obliterate any recognition of hierarchical authority in any relationship, meaning for instance, in a marriage both parties are in mutual submission to each other's authority 50/50, such that no one person is in a position of authority to the other. Again, Paul is not speaking of mutual submission among equals as if there is no authority within a certain given relationship, nor is he talking about submission generically to capture some general concept of practicing humility. That's not what he is driving at, rather the relationships he has in mind are divinely ordered relationships such as those he's about to provide examples of in verses 22 and following with wives and bond-servants and children. In this sense, verse 21 is a little unique and it serves as a hinge verse. Verse 21 is a hinge verse not only in relation to verses 15 to 21 because it is the last participle of this paragraph, but it also is a lead introductory verse to the whole next section of the household codes beginning with verse 22. It serves, really, as a programmatic statement, if you will, in introducing the whole subject, the whole topic of submission in which he is going to turn more specifically in verse 22. In fact, if this might help make the point, did you know that in verse 22 the word "submit" doesn't even show up? In verse 22 there is no verb so when our translators used the word "submit" in verse 22, when it writes, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord," there is some interpretive license

being used there to insert the verb "submit" to try to help us understand what it's saying, but there's actually no verb there. The way it actually reads is, "Wives to their own husbands as to the Lord." Well, where do you get the verb from? Verse 21. You see, verse 21 is the "submit" and then he goes into verse 22, "Wives to their own husbands as to the Lord." It's as if Paul is writing beginning with verse 21 something like this, "Submit to one another and what I mean is wives to their husbands, children to their parents, slave to their masters."

To be filled with the Spirit is to exercise proper godly submission within divinely ordered relationships. Well, let us consider submission within these divinely ordered relationships. Now given that verse 21 is a hinge verse, one that specifically has in mind submission within certain divinely ordered relationships, we need to clarify the bearing that this has on the dignity of a human being who lives in such a relationship. This is where the Christian worldview shows itself to be quite counter-cultural to what we hear around us with respect to submission militating in some way, I guess, the dignity of a human being. Well we, first of all, carefully distinguish between two words and I'm going to explain these two words as they unfold so be patient. We carefully distinguish between ontology on the one hand, and economy on the other.

Now ontology simply comes from the Greek root for the word "being." So basically ontology is the study of being. The ontological makeup of a human being is different than the ontological makeup of an animal. The ontological makeup of a human being is different than the ontological makeup of God. The beings are different beings. But when we hear the word "economy," you probably immediately think of money and the management of money and resources. The word "economy" literally comes from the words "household management." I don't know if you were aware of that but that's actually what the word "economy," its root comes from, it comes from the word "household" and the word "management" smooshed together. Household management. It concerns the function and operation within a given relationship.

Now let me give you an example so as to understand more clearly the difference between ontology and economy and I want to use the Trinity to help explain this. Whenever we theologically speak about the Trinity, we distinguish between what we call the economic Trinity, or let me start with ontology, the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity, okay? Now follow carefully. We're not talking about two different trinities here at all. These are two different ways of talking about the Trinity so as to best understand the Trinity. The ontological Trinity, on the one hand, concerns what? The being of the Trinity, right, because ontology is the study of being. The ontological Trinity concerns the being of the Trinity and what we affirm about the persons of the Godhead in terms of their being is that they are one and that all three of those persons are equal. There is no hierarchy within the Trinity in terms of its being. The being of the Father, the being of the Son, and the being of the Holy Spirit are all equal with no hierarchy. Not one is in subordination to another in terms of its being.

What about the economic Trinity? That's a little different conversation. The economic Trinity concerns the function of each of those persons, the operation and the roles of

those three persons in relation to their creating and saving purposes. So economically speaking, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit possess different roles and we can distinguish them. We don't distinguish them in terms of their being, they're all equal in terms of their being, but in terms of their role and operation, we can distinguish them economically within the Godhead itself. We can speak of subordination. The Father is never said to submit to the Son. You always consistently find in Scripture that the Son always is submissive to the Father. That's not in terms of their being. They're equal in their being but economically in their operations and the way that they function in their roles, there is a submitting party and a party to whom there is submission that's rendered. Therefore within the Godhead, we affirm that the persons are ontologically identical but economically distinguished. Let me say that again: within the Godhead, we affirm that the persons are ontologically identical but they're economically distinguished. Ontologically they're equal but economically they have roles and functions wherein there is a submitting party and a party to whom submission is rendered.

Now keeping that in mind, let's now apply this understanding with these categories. It's so immensely important to keep those categories distinct in approaching the subject of submission within divinely ordered human relationships. We affirm that the parties involved in such relationships are ontologically equal. In these divinely ordered relationships ontologically in terms of their being, they are equal. There is no compromising of the dignity of the human being who is in a station of submission. In terms of their being, they're the same. There is ontological equivalency. No one being is more valuable than the other being. There is ontological equivalency, however, we do distinguish those parties in those divinely ordered relationships economically in terms of their roles, in terms of their functioning within that divinely ordered relationship. In terms of role and function, there is a party to whom submission is rendered and a party that is rendering that submission, you see. This in no way compromises the value of either party, it simply acknowledges that God in his wisdom has ordered the relationship in such a way that both do not serve the same function, both do not serve the same role.

Now only gross egalitarianism claims that ontological equivalency necessitates economic equivalency. Let me say that again: gross egalitarianism equates the two, that if you have ontological equivalency where the beings are equal to one another, then you de facto must have within the roles and in the functions within that relationship equivalency with no hierarchy and with no submitting party. Do you see that? The Scripture does not embrace egalitarianism. It doesn't. It carefully distinguishes between being and function hence we find the Holy Spirit writing to us in Ephesians 5:21 that one of the fruits of the Spirit's infilling is submission being carried out in a godly way in these divinely ordered relationships. That's the reason we have such a verse and that, actually, is a result of Spirit infilling according to the apostle.

Now let's consider the last consideration which is the motivation for submission in these divinely ordered relationships. Why and how – this is great – why and how is this legitimate to have a party in a position of genuine authority over someone? How and why is it legitimate to have a party who must genuinely submit to another? Keep reading our text. Look at verse 21. It gives us the "why" in verse 21, "submitting to one another in the

fear of God." You see, God who is a God of order, has ordered it this way. That's a very basic principle we have to embrace. God has ordered it this way. The idea of submission is not the result of man's philosophical contemplation but is the result of the perfect plan and perfect wisdom and the perfect will of a Creator who designed it that way. Submission is not a human idea, it's a God idea. God has ordered his creation the way he has ordered it and do you know what? To militate against his divine wisdom is just to pursue harm for yourself.

Why do we practice submission within divinely ordered relationships? Because we fear God more than we fear man. It is the fear of God that is our motivation. Most of egalitarian thought can be chalked up to just fear of man but the Christian filled with the Spirit is more sensitive to God's pleasure than man's pleasure; more sensitive to God's reasoning than man's reasoning. Simply put, the Christian who is filled with the Spirit is interested in submission to God and his design than submission to man and man's tireless pursuit of designing life by his own wisdom. Our reason submits to God's reason. Our will submits to God's will even if it's not popular and even if it's not the going philosophy of the day because we fear God and his reasoning and his design more than we do about the ruminations and the philosophical conclusions of man.

You see, ultimately if I can put this succinctly, exercising godly submission as we're called to, is to exercise submission to God. That's what we're doing, we're submitting to God and surely the God who has created order knows something about the order that he has designed and the Lord is providing us insight into how he has wired certain relationships. Think about this for a moment: he has hardwired these divinely ordered relationships to function in the way that he has wired them and part of that wiring is the inclusion of submission within certain relationships so exercising submission is not only God-glorifying but guess who it's best for? It's best for us.

Final thought for us to consider here is when we do find ourselves submitting to God, who ultimately do we look like? Who do we look like? We look like the Lord Jesus whose entire life was lived in relation to his Father. Everything he did, everything he did on this earth was a matter of fulfilling his role as a submitting party to his Father. Everything Jesus did, every thought that he had was in submission, in fulfilling that role, that function. He was equal with the Father, equal with the Holy Spirit in terms of being, but not in terms of economy. In terms of function, the Son submits to the Father and everything that he did was for that end, even when it included actions that were most unpopular by the Lord Jesus and actions that were most unpleasant by the Lord Jesus Christ. His submission to his Father did not mean that every step was hunky-dory, it meant that even when those steps included great suffering and great unpleasantness, his joy was wrapped up in submission to his Father. It was not dictated by his circumstance or by the suffering he would have to undergo in submission to his Father.

As we brothers and sisters filled with the Spirit, carry out our biblical roles of submission, do you know what? We have the privilege of exercising one of these aspects by which we imitate and mirror the Son of God who is a submitting party to his Father

and did so perfectly. What a privilege it is to us and we ought to see it as so, that we have the opportunity to mirror the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for our Lord Jesus whose whole life and whole mission was wrapped up in that one theme, submission to his Father. Father, we thank you that our Lord Jesus was obedient even unto death, even the death of the cross, all because his joy was found in submitting to you even if it was to his own hurt, even when it was unpopular and unpleasant. You know well, Father, the kinds of thinking around us that pull on our hearts. Oh, how tempted we are to succumb to the thinking of this world and the rationality of this world that thinks that it's so wise in the way that it views relationships but, Father, impress upon our hearts and minds your word so that we think our thoughts after you and not take our direction from this world. Our Father, we ask that you would help us in this calling to submission. Help us, Father, to carry out faithfully and joyfully this calling of submission in our life knowing that you wired these divinely ordered relationships that way. Help us, Lord, to see that we're actually pursuing our good when we do so. May we, indeed, do it all to the glory of your great name for we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.