

Ephesians 5:21-24

Introduction

We've been looking recently at Ephesians chapters 5 and 6 and the will of God for us as children, as fathers (and mothers), as wives, and as husbands. We've seen, in particular, that subjecting ourselves to one another—to the God-ordained authorities in our lives (fathers and mothers, and husbands)—is one of the supernatural fruits, and therefore one of the signs, of being “filled in the Spirit” (5:15-21). Our subjection to the God-ordained authorities in our lives is one of the ways that we live out experientially our growing understanding of—our spiritual insight into and perception of—God's gracious, saving will. But what does this subjection have to do with God's gracious, saving will?

At all times, but perhaps especially in our day of a militant and pervasive egalitarianism, “subjection” (of any kind) has strong negative connotations, even to the point of being something repulsive (cf. submission). The reason for this is ultimately our desire for independence even from the authority of God Himself. It's *this desire*, which lies at the root of our sin nature, that makes the very idea of subjection to be such a repulsive thing. But now, Paul says, we are “[God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Now we're a new creation. Our sinful lust for self-autonomy has been replaced by a glad surrender to God, and an obedient subjection to Him and to His will. We've given up our craving for “freedom” and self-direction (which is really just to be slaves to sin) and become instead “slaves to righteousness” (Rom. 6:16-19). Compared to the time when subjection was something repugnant to us, now a willing subjection to God has come to define each one of us as true followers of Jesus. This is a radical transformation! And of course, it's also a transformation that's ongoing. So it's within this larger Gospel context that the Apostle Paul commands us to be subject to one another as the manifestation of our subjection to God:

I. Ephesians 5:21–22, 33b — “[Be] subject to one another,” he says, “*in the fear of Christ*, wives to your own husbands *as to the Lord*... the wife must see to it that she *fears her husband*.”

We saw last time that the mere presence of “authority,” in and of itself (even the authority of a sinful husband or father or master), is a manifestation of the *reality* of that ultimate authority of God—from which all human authority derives. Subjection to the derived authority of another human being, therefore, is uniquely and necessarily the expression of that fear and trembling that we owe to God Himself. When we translate, “the wife must see to it that she respects her husband” (a faulty translation), we focus all the attention horizontally on the husband rather than vertically on God *via* the husband and we miss the link that Paul is drawing with the “fear of *Christ*” in verse 21. And so this translation, in the attempt to make the wife's subjection to her husband more “palatable” and less “offensive,” empties the wife's subjection to her husband of its true freedom and power and beauty. When a wife can *understand* with a true spiritual insight and perception what it means to “fear her husband,” then she'll be freed and empowered to be subject to her husband (even when he is, himself, “unworthy”).

It's here that we see the fundamental and dangerous flaw in the book that was published twenty years ago called "Love and Respect" (and which quickly became a national bestseller). The basic premise of the book is summed up in the sub-title: "The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs." There is no husband who desperately needs respect (unless this respect is simply the respect owed to every human being and not the respect that's uniquely owed to authority). He may desperately want it (which is ultimately the sign of an underlying problem), but it's not what he desperately needs. Likewise, there are no fathers or mothers who desperately need their children's respect. The moment a husband desperately needs respect he has ceased to be a faithful husband. Paul doesn't tell the wives to see to it that they "respect" their husbands in order to meet the felt need of their husbands, much less to give their husbands what they want. Neither does Paul tell the husbands to love their wives because this is what she most desires.

The author of this book argues that men value respect more highly than love while women value love more highly than respect, and so what we end up with practically is a fundamentally "man-centered" approach to the marriage relationship. What we end up with practically is a mutual egalitarianism—if not a relationship where the wife is "in control" ("desires" vs. "desperately needs"). The husband says to his wife: "I give you the love you desire, and you give me the respect I desperately need." The wife says to her husband: "I give you the respect you desperately need, and you give me the love I desire." But in fact, Paul tells the husbands uniquely to love their wives not because their wives desire to be loved, but because the husband is the head of the wife and because this headship is the context in which he is uniquely enabled and empowered to love his wife. And Paul tells the wives to see to it that they "fear their husbands" not because their husbands desperately need (or desire) to be feared, but because this is what enables them to be subject to their husbands "in the fear of *Christ*."

"[Subjection (*hypotasso*)] means to take a subordinate [place] in relation to that of another" (Lincoln). It means to place oneself underneath another. It's important to draw the distinction here between a *subordinate* place and an *inferior* place. Grammatically and semantically, this distinction is obvious. This placing of oneself underneath another is not about an inferior place. There's nothing about it whatsoever that's in any way inferior (in fact, as we'll see later, the differing roles of the husband and wife are fundamentally *equal*). On the other hand, it *is* a subordinate place. The wife is to place herself underneath her husband, to take a subordinate position with respect to her husband as the one for whom she was made, to be his helpmeet. As the Apostle Paul writes in another place:

- 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 — Man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man [because the man needed the woman; because it was not good for the man to be alone; Gen. 2:18].

The wife's relationship to her husband is to be characterized, then, by a spirit, an attitude, a lifestyle of subjection. So the Apostle Peter exhorts wives:

- 1 Peter 3:4–5 — Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the incorruptible beauty of *a lowly [meek] and quiet [peaceable] spirit*, which in God's sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, *being subject to their own husbands*.

The traditional translation of a “gentle and quiet spirit” might imply a certain kind of personality. But personality isn’t the point here. Meekness and peaceableness (lowliness and quietness) are fruits of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22-23) that in some sense all Christians should possess—men as well as women (Mat. 5:5; 1 Tim. 2:2). And yet in the context of marriage, these are the Christian virtues (or fruits of the Spirit) that uniquely enable the wife to live in subjection to her husband. Even as a wife is to be at all times adorned with a meek and peaceable spirit, so her relationship to her husband is to be at all times adorned by a spirit, an attitude, a lifestyle of being in subjection. We see here why “subjection” is a more helpful word than “submission” (as well as being a better translation of the Greek). “Subjection” is broader and more all-encompassing than “submission.”

Paul speaks directly to the wives here, not to the husbands: “*Wives [be subject] to your own husbands.*” It is the wife who must “see to it that she fears her husband.” It’s not the husband who must see to it that his wife is in subjection to him or that she fears him—or God! As I always point out in my wedding homily, subjection is the tool of the wife, and not the tool of the husband. It’s not the tool of the husband, but it *is* the tool of the wife. It’s a choice that only the wife can make out of obedience to God, and not to the word of any man.

“[Be] subject to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to your own husbands as to the Lord...”

II. Ephesians 5:23a — ...because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church...

Why is the wife to be subject to her husband? – *Because* the husband is the **head** of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church. Paul wrote earlier in Ephesians:

- Ephesians 1:20-22 (cf. 4:10, 15) — [God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, **far above all rule and authority and power and dominion**, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come; and He **subjected all things under his feet** and gave Him as **head over** all things to the church.

The metaphor of “headship” here refers not to “source” (as some commentators argue), but to authority. So one commentator writes very boldly, but I believe very biblically:

Here [in Ephesians 5] the headship of the husband, in the light of the usage at 1:22 [which we just read], the general context of the authority structure of the Graeco-Roman household [and also the Jewish household], and the [subjection] of the wife to her husband within marriage in vv. 22-24, refers to his having authority over his wife; thus he is her leader or ruler (O’Brien).

When Paul says that the husband is the head of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church*, his main point isn’t to qualify or limit the husband’s headship, but rather to emphasize and establish the husband’s headship. His main point isn’t to caution husbands against exercising their headship in un-Christlike ways (though that’s obviously relevant; cf. vv. 25-30), but rather to strengthen his exhortation to the wives in light of the God-given authority of their husbands.

Why is it necessary that the wife be in subjection to her husband? Paul answers: “Because the husband is the *head* of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church.*” And then Paul adds rather abruptly:

III. Ephesians 5:23b — ...—(He Himself the Savior of the body).*

Why does Paul say this now? Why does Paul say this here? The point seems to be that while the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, the husband is certainly not the savior of the wife as Christ is the Savior of the Church (cf. Braune). Indeed, when Paul says in verse 25, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” this love of Christ for the *church* is a love that includes both husbands and wives together. When Paul says in verse 26 that Christ sanctified His bride, “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,” this is a bride that includes both husbands and wives together. When Paul says in verse 27 that Christ will “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish,” this is to say that He will present to Himself husbands and wives together in the bride which is His church. Husbands are no less a part of Christ’s bride than wives. Therefore, the wife’s relationship with God is not mediated through her husband (any more than a child’s relationship with God is mediated through his or her parents). The wife’s relationship with God is mediated through Christ alone (He Himself [and *He* alone being] the Savior of the body”; cf. 1 Pet. 3:7).

But isn’t this obvious? Do we feel insulted that Paul even feels the need to point this out? We shouldn’t if we give the immediately preceding words their full weight, and if we understand Paul’s positive emphasis. It’s as if Paul would say to the wives: While your husband is indeed your head *even as* Christ is head of the church, nevertheless Christ alone is your Savior, and so you look *not* to your husband for sanctification and cleansing by washing of water and the Word, but directly and only to Christ, and to Christ alone. You look not to your husband for your ultimate security and peace and fulfillment, but to Christ, and to Christ alone. And now can we see how it’s precisely this fundamental equality in Christ that frees the believing wife to live in subjection to her husband? It’s precisely this fundamental equality that enables the wife to be so wholly secure in Christ that she’s able to subject herself to her husband who is her head.

“The husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the Church—(*He Himself* the Savior of the body).”

IV. Ephesians 5:24 — But as the Church is subject to Christ, so also wives [must be subject] to [their] husbands in everything.

Paul’s “*but*” (*alla*) tells us that he’s going back, now, to reemphasize his previous point. Christ’s uniqueness as the only Savior of both husbands and wives doesn’t mean that the wife has no

* There are three different ways of understanding this. Some people think that Paul is starting to think of the husbands now. So this is a “subtle” reminder to the husbands that just like Christ uses His headship for the salvation of the church, so they should use their headship for the ultimate good and salvation of their wives. But once again, Paul is very much addressing the wives here, and not the husbands. So is Paul encouraging the wives to see submission to their husbands’ headship as something that will ultimately benefit them and perhaps even bring them “salvation”? (cf. Calvin) If that’s so, then Paul’s way of saying it seems very vague (“He Himself the Savior of the body”; cf. Lincoln). The third way is preferable (see sermon).

other head but Christ, or that she is called to be subject to no man, but only to Christ. Even though Christ Himself is Savior of the body, nevertheless, as the Church is subject to Christ, so also wives must be subject to their husbands in everything.” Paul writes in another place:

- 1 Corinthians 11:3 — I want you to *understand* that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

When it comes to husband and wife, there’s complete equality in worth and value before God—they’re equally made in the image of God, they’re equal heirs of the grace of life, and their differing roles in the marriage relationship are of equal worth and importance. But for all this equality, there’s very much inequality in terms of authority and subjection — and necessarily so. Subjection is not the wife’s *role* (even as authority is not the husband’s *role*). Instead, subjection is that which enables the wife to fulfill her role as a helpmeet — as the one who was made because it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:8-10).

Paul’s “in everything” means *at all times* and *in every area of life* (cf. O’Brien; Hendriksen), obviously barring those times when subjection would mean direct disobedience to God’s command (cf. cases of abuse). What Paul is saying is that “no part of [the wife’s] life should be outside of her relationship to her husband and outside of subordination to him” (Clark; quoted in O’Brien). Subjection isn’t a necessary evil held in reserve for those times when all efforts have been exhausted to reach agreement. Subjection within the marriage relationship is a way of life; it’s all-encompassing. Subjection is that which daily equips and empowers the wife to fulfill her holy calling as an equal heir with her husband of the grace of life. It’s this subjection “in everything” that helps us to understand and to perceive the true beauty of verses like these:

- Proverbs 31:10–12, 27–31 (cf. 12:4) — An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above pearls. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She deals bountifully with him for good and not evil all the days of her life... She watches over the ways of her household... Her children rise up and bless her; as for her husband, he also praises her, saying: “Many daughters have done excellently, but you have gone above them all.” Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears Yahweh, she shall be praised. Give to her from the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

We already know from the rest of Ephesians that Christ’s headship over the church is always the empowering context for His love of the church. And so we also see from the rest of Ephesians that the church’s subjection to Christ’s headship can only bring about the fuller experience of His love (Eph. 1:22-23 & 3:14-19; cf. Lincoln; O’Brien). What might this tell us about the wife’s subjection to her earthly husband? Here’s what I’ve said in the past to the bride on her wedding day:

If your husband is called to love you just as Christ has loved His bride, then you’re free to enjoy being loved by your husband. And it’s in part that you might be empowered to enjoy your husband’s love to the fullest [I’m not talking here about a romantic love] that God calls you to live in subjection to his headship. May your subjection to your husband always be the context for the fuller enjoyment of his love [again, not a “romantic” love],

even as the church's subjection to Christ is always the context for the fuller enjoyment of His love.

Husbands, are we listening? Is this preparing us already for next week's message?

This may sound idealistic in a fallen and sinful world—and it is. But Paul makes no apologies for calling us to live out the ideal. Paul never suggests that the wife should be subject to her husband only if he's loving her as he ought to, with a true Christlike love. The Apostle Peter writes:

- 1 Peter 3:1 — Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives.

Wives, when your husband is not loving you as he should, you can still be subject to him in everything “*in the fear of Christ*” and “*as to the Lord*,” knowing that *His* love for you as your only Savior is perfect and unceasing. Here especially we're reminded that marriage, like every other part of this earthly and temporal life, has a goal beyond itself. This is what enables even an “unloved” wife to be subject to her husband. This is what enables the single person to find fulfillment in Christ apart from marriage. And this is what should guide every young woman as she thinks of being prepared for marriage, and also of choosing the man to whom she will be called to subject herself as her head.

Conclusion

In the end, a wife's subjection to her husband is just one way that she's putting off the “old man [Adam],” and putting on the “new man [Christ]”—the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 4:20-24; cf. 2:10). The Christian wife's subjection to her husband is the sign of her exalted status as one being remade into the image of God. It's one of the signs that she's a member of the true bride of Christ and—in the case of marriage to a Christian husband—that she's a member together with her husband of the one true bride of Christ.

We know from Ephesians chapter 2 (vv. 14-18) that in the church, Gentiles are no less privileged than Jews when it comes to access to God through Jesus Christ. So also, wives are no less privileged than husbands, and children no less privileged than parents. Paul says in Galatians:

- Galatians 3:28 (cf. Col. 3:11) — There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And yet even as the Gospel levels every imaginable distinction in terms of our access to God through Christ, it's this *same Gospel* that establishes and reaffirms *at the same time* the goodness and beauty of a wife's subjection to her husband in everything. There's mystery here, but it's a wonderful mystery that we've come to “understand”—that we've come to have insight into—by faith (cf. 5:17). So then: “[Be] subject to one another *in the fear of Christ*, wives to your own husbands *as to the Lord* because the husband is the head of the wife *as also Christ is the head of the Church*—(*He Himself* [being] the Savior of the body). But *as the Church is subject to Christ*, so also wives [must be subject] to [their] husbands in everything.”