

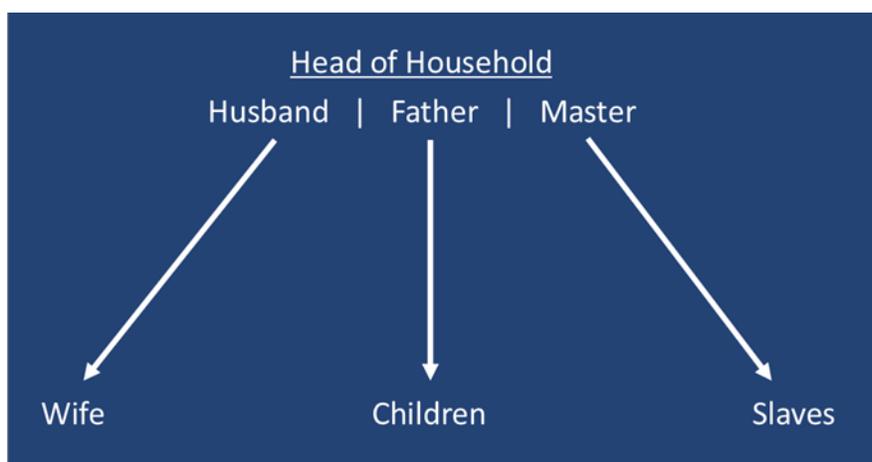
SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 5:22-6:9	DATE	11.17.19
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LESSON SUMMARY	Christian families are called to mutual submission in reverence for Christ. Good can be pursued regardless of a person's situation.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

A Note on the Roman Household

In Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Paul addresses relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters. To better understand his instructions to these groups, it will be helpful to understand the household structure in ancient Roman culture. It looked like this:



As can be seen in the diagram, the head of household played three separate roles related to others in the house/family. He was a husband to his wife, a father to his children, and a master to his slaves. In each of these roles, the head of household exercised authority over his counterparts. Thus, wives were to submit to their husbands, children to obey their fathers, and slaves to obey their masters. By and large, the early church did not challenge the form of this structure. Instead, it sought to transform the relationships within it. Thus, the head of household was required to use his authority well, and wives, children, and slaves were to view their secondary stations as places of service to Jesus. And of course, Christian solidarity was to permeate relationships.

The question that confronts us today is whether the household instructions found in the New Testament are culturally conditioned or stand for all time. Regarding slaves, we rightly understand slavery as an outdated institution. Regarding children, it makes sense that the father would have authority over the child for all time, though we now more readily speak of parents. Moving to wives, the question becomes sticky, as good and faithful Christians have argued differently. For some, the wife's submission to her husband is part of the created order. For others, the husband/wife relationship described in the NT is culturally conditioned and can be renegotiated in different times and places.

When we examine the NT, two foundations are given for upholding the Roman view of marital relationships: witness and theology. Regarding the former, Titus 2 is a prime example of a wife's submission to her husband being related to witness. In that text, older women are to teach younger women "to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God." Note that the concern here is that outsiders will not malign God's word. On the theology side of things, Ephesians 5:22-33 ties the husband/wife relationship to the Christ/church relationship when it says, "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." The argument here is that Christ will always be head of the church and the church will always submit to Christ, regardless of cultural setting. If the husband/wife dynamic is to mimic the Christ/church dynamic, wouldn't it also be true for all times and all places? We'll examine that last question in depth in the commentary and teaching notes below.

²²Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³²This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

This section on household codes flows from discussion of being filled with the Spirit in vv 18-21. In fact, v 22 relies on v 21 for its meaning. In the original Greek, the flow of the text goes like this:

...but be filled with the Spirit

- speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit
- singing and praising the Lord in your hearts
- giving thanks at all times for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father
- submitting to one another in fear of Christ -
 - wives to your own husbands as to the Lord (there is no verb)

Note here that when we come to v 22, we are dealing with a specific instance of the submission mentioned in v 21. In fact, all of 5:22-6:9 can be seen as specific instances of mutual submission as they play out in the household. More than this, all talk of household structures is linked to being filled with the Spirit. Apparently, Paul's instructions to each member of the household have an impact on their spiritual lives. In saying this, it is important to note that being filled with the Spirit is not linked to accepting a lower social status. Rather, it has to do with doing good in whatever status one finds him/herself. The idea here is that regardless of our station in life we are able to walk in ways that please the Lord.

In dealing with the husband/wife relationship, Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. Bringing Jesus into the picture of the wife's submission is a common NT way of speaking to those in subordinate positions in relationships. In fact, Paul will give the same guidance to slaves in 6:5-8. The idea is that submission or obedience to authority figures can be transformed into submission and service to

Christ. This is an important redirection of service that makes submission to human authority in this age a person's glory in the next, for that submission is ultimately taken as faithfulness to Jesus himself.

While bringing Jesus into the picture of service is a common NT way of speaking to those in subordinate positions, what comes next in v 23 is unique. Here, Paul grounds the wife's submission to the husband in his theological vision of Christ and the church. The wife, he says, is to submit to her husband as to the Lord *because* the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body. The husband/wife relationship, then, is a reflection of the relationship between Jesus and the church. In speaking of the church as Christ's body, Paul calls 4:15-16 to mind. There, Paul used head/body imagery to say that the church is growing up into the head (that is Christ). Here in ch 5, he uses the same imagery to emphasize how the body submits to the direction of the head. This is true in the church, and it is also true in the marriage relationship.

The flip side of this equation is that husbands are to mimic the headship of Christ even as their wives mimic the submission of the church. This Christ-imitation turns out to be a tall order, for Jesus gave himself up for the church (v 25) in order to cleanse her and make her holy (vv 26-28). Because Christ's headship was self-giving, the husband's use of his authority *for the benefit* of his wife can be understood as the husband's submission to the wife (remember that this entire discussion comes under the call to submit to one another). Submission for the one in authority is the good use of that authority for those in his care.

Having defined the headship of the husband as self-giving, Paul moves on to further expound on the head/body imagery that he has already employed. If the husband is the head of the wife (v 23), then he should view the wife as his body, which means that he should care for her! Thus, for the husband to love the wife is ultimately for him to love himself (v 28) because their bond is so close. When Paul says that "no one ever hated their own body," he is speaking in generalities rather than making a blanket statement that we can easily identify as false (people have hated their own bodies). In a healthy life, one does not hate his/her body, and that is what Paul is pointing to as the norm for husbands loving their wives. Paul underscores this point by quoting Gen 2:24, which is an interesting verse when we put it in context. In the ancient world, women left their own families to join their husbands' families. In Genesis, though, the man leaves his family and clings to his wife. This picture of husbandly responsibility is well in line with Paul's focus on the husband caring for his wife. Moreover, the idea that the two "shall become one flesh" seems to be a starting point for Paul's understanding of marriage as the uniting of the husband and wife into one body.

Thus far, we have focused on how 5:21-33 addresses the husband/wife relationship. However, the passage also contains rich allusions to Christ and the church. In this line of thought we find:

- Christ is the Savior of the church, which is his body. (v 23)
- Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (v 25)
 - He did so to make her holy and present her to himself as radiant (vv 26-27)
 - He made her holy through the washing of the water of the word (v 26; this probably refers to the word of the gospel)
- Christ feeds and cares for his body. (v 29)
- Christ's union with the church is a profound mystery. (v 32)

All these descriptors show Christ's deep love and care for the church. More than that (as already mentioned) they are the pattern given for husbands.

Regarding how the husband/wife relationship plays out today in light of all this, we'll look at that more fully in the "Teaching the Text" section below.

^{6:1} Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—³ "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."
⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Moving now to children, Paul calls them to obey their parents. In doing so, he echoes the fifth commandment, which he references in v 2. Note here that this instruction is nothing new – it has been a central rule for God's people since they entered into covenant with God at Mt. Sinai. When Paul says that obeying parents is the only commandment with a promise, he is once again speaking in generalities. In a healthy family, children obeying their parents sets them up for good character and good living. This does not mean that tragedy will never strike. Rather, it is built into the pattern of things that children who obey loving parents move in good directions.

On the other side of the child/parent equation is Paul's instruction to fathers (he addresses fathers rather than parents here because fathers were the head of household). Once again, we see that authority is meant to be used well. In the case of children, fathers should bring them up to know, love, and live well before Jesus.

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.
⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

When the discussion moves to the slave/master relationship, Paul gives instruction that makes many of us uncomfortable today. And rightly so! Slavery has rightly been identified as a sinful and harmful institution. Why, then, didn't Paul counsel abolition rather than obedience? NT Wright is helpful here. He states of the instruction to slaves in Titus:

Slavery was a fact of life and there was no point pretending it wasn't. You could no more abolish slavery overnight in the first century than you could invent space travel. The fact that you might hope it would happen one day, and wished it would, wouldn't justify giving slaves the impression that now they were Christians they could disobey their masters—any more than a futuristic fantasy about space travel would have justified Paul in selling tickets to Mars.¹

As Paul addresses slaves, he addresses the reality of their situations. In doing so, he calls for obedience with an important caveat: they should view their service to human masters as service to Jesus. Jesus, it seems,

¹ Wright,

will accept their obedience to human masters as obedience to himself and will reward them for doing good. This rule of reward is the same whether a person is a slave or free. Thus, Paul relativizes slavery by showing that a slave's submission can ultimately result in his glory because of Christ. This is not to say, of course, that Paul explains the difficulties of slavery away. Instead, he reframes it in light of the gospel, which views slaves as on par with everyone else in God's economy.

Moving to masters, they are once again to use their authority well. In this instance, Paul majors on the negative side of that command – masters should not threaten their slaves. He then ironically follows this instruction with what sounds like a threat! The same Master who will reward both slave and free for good is watching over human masters. Because Jesus doesn't show favoritism based on societal station, human masters should walk carefully. Whereas the slave is directed to look forward to reward, the master is directed to consider judgment!

TEACH THE TEXT

In teaching this text, I would focus on mutual submission, family relationships, and societal stations.

MUTUAL SUBMISSION

As noted above, this entire section on household codes follows hard on the heels of an exhortation to submit to one another that itself is attached to being filled with the Spirit. Thus, the whole unit can be seen as specific instances of mutual submission. What is interesting, though, is that submission means different things for different people. For those under authority, it means respecting another's authority. For those in authority, it means using authority well for the sake of those in their care. In this, everyone in the Christian community is empowered to good regardless of their social status, and Jesus will reward everyone without any thought for their positions on the social ladder. We might think of mutual submission with the image of a chain. Each link must bow to the other if the chain is to remain strong and united (if one link fails to bend, the chain falls apart). While the basic posture of bowing is common to all, just how each of us bows is related to our specific situations.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Paul's discussions of wives/husbands, fathers/children, and slaves/masters all have to do with household relationships. Bringing this discussion to the present, we need to remember that the family today looks differently than it did in ancient Rome. Most obviously different is the presence of slaves in the Roman household. When we talk about family relationships today, slavery (thankfully) doesn't affect the conversation. Beyond this obvious difference is the important point that the Roman family was hierarchical, with the husband/father/master in the head position. When it comes to kids, this hierarchical structure still makes sense (though we include the mother on the same level as the father), as does the instruction for fathers (and mothers) to use their authority to bring their kids up in light of the Lord. Moving to the husband wife relationship, things get a bit stickier, as the role and view of women in the USA differs drastically from their role in Roman society. Klyne Snodgrass offers a helpful description of women in 1st century Rome:

In a few places like Sparta and Egypt women were given greater freedom and responsibility. In most places, however, *if* they were allowed to live at birth, women were minimally educated,

could not be witnesses in a court of law, could not adopt children or make a contract, could not own property or inherit, and were viewed, as both Aristotle and Josephus said, in all respects to be inferior to a man. They were seen as less intelligent, less moral, the source of sin, and a continual temptation (see Ecclesiasticus 25:13–26:27).

Respectable women—at least the ones described in our sources—were kept from public life. Typically, women lived in one part of the house and men lived in another. In many cases they did not eat meals together. In larger homes virgins spent most of their time in a section set aside for them. Conversation with people outside the house was kept to a minimum. For a woman even to do her spinning in her doorway was scandalous. Imagine how scandalous some would view the early church where both sexes met together in a house for worship and shared the Lord's Supper!²

In this context, Paul called wives to submit and respect their husbands (he doesn't call them to obey), which oftentimes meant accepting the husband's higher status. Importantly, Paul subverted the Roman structure by (1) redirecting the wife's submission to Christ, (2) speaking directly to the wife as a person of worth (most household codes didn't even address wives, children, or slaves), and (3) calling the husband to a revolutionary use of his authority. Regarding that last point, some philosophers argued that husbands should be kind to and love their wives. Paul, though, goes several steps further in making the love of Jesus for the church the pattern for the husband's love. Note here that the Christian husband was to imitate *the highest form of love the earth has ever witnessed – Christ's handing himself over for the sake of his people*.

Moving now to the present-day USA, we can say readily that women's place in society has vastly improved since Roman times. Rather than being viewed as inferior to men, women are viewed as equal (though we still have work to do on actually treating women as equals in areas like equal pay) and have the same rights as men (especially in the political process). As such, the question of the husband/wife relationship must be applied to a new and different context.

One approach to updating Ephesians 5:25-33 for the present is to view Paul's words as culturally conditioned. If this is the case, Paul's words can be renegotiated for new times and new places. Whereas it was appropriate to root the Roman husband/wife dynamic in the Christ/church dynamic (where Christ is the head and the church submits to him), it might be better today to speak of the husband/wife relationship in light of John 13, where the wife and husband are to submit to one another by washing one another's feet. The idea is that the gospel is meant to impact the husband/wife relationship as it is found rather than rearranging it to match earlier time periods.

The other approach is to view the rooting of the marriage relationship in the headship of Christ to the church as controlling for all time. Thus, the design for marriage has always included the headship of the husband and has always looked forward to Christ and the church. If this is true, Paul is describing the natural order of marriage and his words are binding for today. At the same time, it is important when taking this view to affirm that headship means something different today than it did in ancient Rome. For many Christians of this persuasion, headship looks to spiritual headship, meaning that the husband sets the spiritual tone in the family. This view allows for the husband to take the lead while also allowing the wife to function with much more freedom than was available in ancient Rome. For other families, the wife controls most daily decisions, while the onus for big decisions and the direction of the family falls on the husband.

² Snodgrass, 303.

As we consider these two approaches, it is helpful to note first that both celebrate and seek to emulate the love of Jesus. Any marriage that houses that kind of love is probably going to do just fine! Beyond that insight, here are a few other points to consider:

- Whichever approach we take, witness needs to be a major consideration (as it was for the early church). As such, we need to present our arguments and conduct our lives in such a manner that “no one will malign the word of God.”
- If we take the second approach, which celebrates Eph 5:22-33 as binding, we need to do so with modern views of women in mind. Because women rightly enjoy a much higher status in the USA than ancient Rome, our embrace of head/body imagery should not demote wives to inferior statuses that belong to previous time periods. I have seen a couple of different approaches that respect women’s status. First, some argue that the husband’s headship has to do with spiritual headship, meaning that the husband sets the spiritual tone in the marriage. This allows for the wife to function in any number of roles while still respecting his spiritual authority. Second, some argue that the wife should be in charge of “every-day” decisions, while the husband is responsible for big decisions and the general direction of the family.
- If we take the second approach, it is more appropriate to speak of the husband’s responsibility in the marriage – which is to love his wife self-sacrificially – rather than his rights or privileges.
- If we take the second approach, headship is defined by Jesus’ example. Therefore, any headship that becomes abusive, controlling, indifferent, or neglectful is illegitimate, and it is appropriate for the wife to protect herself as she keeps her first loyalty to Christ.
- In support of the second approach, while women have an equal standing in US society, I anecdotally know of many women who want nothing more than for their husbands to take the lead in their relationships. In this, they aren’t looking for a tyrant. Rather, they are tired of pushing the family themselves and would welcome the husband’s initiative. If this is the case, Eph 5 may be more suited to our society than we sometimes think because it calls husbands to take responsibility in ways that they sometimes neglect.
- If we take the first approach, which seeks to renegotiate Paul’s imagery and terminology, we need to actually bring the gospel to bear on the husband relationship rather than dismissing any NT guidance on the subject. The danger here is that we talk around Eph 5 to the point that the scripture has nothing to say. Just as Paul has high ideals for marriage in his context, so also should we if we renegotiate how things are presented. The high example of Christ must still hold sway.
- Regardless of the approach we take, the husband is called to take responsibility for his family (this responsibility is more shared in the first approach, but it is still there).
- Good Christians are on both sides of this matter. As such, we need to make room for each other rather than despising one another. Here it is probably good to go with Paul’s attitude toward the Philippians: “And if on some point you think differently, God too will make that clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Phil 3:15b-16).

One other big thing to note when considering family relationships is that the gospel is meant to directly influence them. Family is ground zero for living out the Christian faith.

As you approach this subject, rather than taking a dogmatic stand, it may be better to ask folks how they understand this passage and then augment their insights. This makes space for conversation rather than putting people on the defensive.

SOCIETAL STATIONS

Though we might wish that Paul had been more progressive in instructions to slaves, his thoughts here point to an important Christian reality: We are able to please God regardless of our circumstances. This does not mean that we should accept junky circumstances as ideal. Rather, Paul's words empower us to be active agents of good within them. This good will be rewarded.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Introductory Question

1. This entire passage falls under the category of "mutual submission" in v 24. How does mutual submission play out in real life? How does a person in authority submit to those he/she oversees?

5:25-33

1. What do you think it means for the wife to submit to the husband?
2. Are there ways that this passage could be used harmfully? How?
3. What is Paul's view of the husband/wife relationship? What is it compared to?
4. What are your first reactions to the husband being called the head of the wife?
5. For Paul, what does headship mean for the husband?
6. What do you think would happen if husbands took this call seriously?
7. Do you think this passage is binding for today or that it needs to be renegotiated in light of current views of women's and men's equality? Why?

6:1-4

1. What does it mean that the fifth commandment is the first commandment with a promise? Does this guarantee that obedient kids will live long lives?
2. What is the parental responsibility in this passage? What does it look like to bring our children up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

6:5-9

1. Why don't you think Paul argued for the abolition of slavery?
2. What can we learn from his instructions to slaves?

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