

Submit to One Another

Ephesians 5:21

When you preach a sermon the hope is that you are drawing out of God's Word, not from the point you want to make, using the Bible to back it up. Otherwise it is not God's Word, by my weak words. To help with that churches traditionally came up with lessons from the Bible that follow a cycle. The idea is to have that cycle, rather than what concerns the pastor, guide the preaching.

But here we are left with a reading to begin the new school year from Ephesians 5. As a college student you will be struggling with how to make church and your faith relevant to college life. Then you're hit with these words, "Wives, submit to your husbands." Traditionally that was translated, "Wives, obey your husbands." Those words have been used throughout the years to give license to all kinds of abuse and mistreatment. If anything stands against what we are taught at a place like Iowa State University is these words which seem to give permission to practice sexism. So why bother with anything else the Bible or the church has to say? Honestly, don't those words shock you--"Obey your husband"?

Pastor Richard Kapfer, who preached here from 1976-85 before he became district president and who was such a noted preacher that he had calls to both of our seminaries to teach preaching, said he wouldn't preach from this text because it took too much explaining and needed people to dialogue about it. I have felt the same way, but my concern is that many of you will not have a chance to study this in Bible class. And this has so much to say to us about how we are to live with each other.

"Wives, submit to your husbands." It is sad that the lesson began with those words and did not include what is written right before it. St. Paul writes in 5:21, "Out of reverence for Christ, submit to one another." Before we can understand what it

means for wives to submit to their husbands, we need to know what it means to submit to one another. Otherwise, we will always get it wrong.

"Submit." That may sound like the trainer using a whip to master a caged tiger. It might bring up images of a slave submitting to a master, a poor peasant lying flat on the ground in front of a king, pleading for mercy. In chapter 6 of Ephesians, right after our lesson this morning, Paul tells children to "obey" their parents. The word "obey" definitely implies that the children are under the parent. The parents decide how you are to be clothed, fed, and educated.

But Ephesians 5 says "submit," not "obey." There is a difference. The word "submit" actually comes from a military context. The New Testament is written in Greek. Five hundred years before Jesus the Persians were the great empire. They conquered other nations by sheer force of their armies and by clever diplomacy. They invaded Greece, whose armies were small. But in places like Marathon, Thermopylae, and Plataea the Greeks man-handled them. Though the Greek armies were small, they were very disciplined and worked together to win in combat. This might seem surprising because the Persians soldiers were slaves while the Greek were citizen soldiers. However, the Greek troops willingly worked together and sacrificed for each other to protect their land.

At the core of this was the way the Greek formed into battle. Instead of going against the enemy as individuals like the mass of Persians did, the Greek formed ranks which made solid lines of shields and spears. When the Greek formed into battle lines, they literally "submitted" to each other. Your shield didn't just protect you; it protected the man to your left; this way his right side was free to attack with a spear or sword. You depended on each

other. You voluntarily “submitted” to protect and be protected.

That is what it means when Paul says, “submit to one another.” It is not the forced obedience on a slave, but the willing sacrifice to help each other.

This is the opposite of what we often see in the world. As students you do compete against others students for grades and then job offers. No one cares if you did your best if there are so many others who do better. Certainly on the Iowa State football team players “submit” to one another to help the team. No one knows that names of the offensive linemen, but if they don’t do their job there is no running game and the quarterback will get sacked all the time. Many modern college teams come out on the field holding each other’s hands as a symbol of the team over the individual, but all those players have to compete to make the team and they compete against other teams. Businesses have found that some of the most effective leaders are those who are humble and sacrifice for the good of the company, but there is still competition to get a job and promotions within the company. And the company is competing against other companies.

But there is no competition among “God’s team.” We do not become follows of Jesus based on anything we have done or deserve. We have been called by grace. Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins and restore us to God. Paul doesn’t just say, “Submit to one another,” but, “Submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ.” Only in a relationship with Jesus Christ does submission make sense. If I am put under someone else, the implication is always that I am inferior. So to tell a woman to submit to her husband implies she is less of a human than he is. It is a license to mistreat others. But “submit” means something different among those who follow Jesus. Jesus, the one who calls us to “submit,” is the one who submitted to His Father, became a human like us, and suffered for us. One of the cardinal principles of the

Christian faith is that Jesus and the Father are equal. Jesus is not His slave. Yet, Jesus voluntarily submitted to the will of the Father—to save us!

To submit to one another is not a put down but the highest calling. It is the chance to be like Jesus—nothing tops that! If we live life in that submission, we do it to gain anything, but to do it as Jesus did—out of love. What did Jesus have to gain from it when as God he has all?

This is Memorial Lutheran Church. Martin Luther once expressed what submission means in these two statements, “I am a Christian, free from sin and slave to no one.” I am a Christian, a slave of Christ to serve others.” Put together what Luther said is a paradox. How can one be free and slave at the same time? How can we submit and not be forced? On our own it is impossible. Either we are real slaves or we are just doing it to gain something for ourselves. But “out of reverence for Christ,” as His people, we can live that way.

That is what makes you unique in this world. Other people can help others, but there is always something behind it, something to gain from it be it friendship, feeling good about it, or the desire to have others depend on us. But as those “who reverence Christ,” we can submit as Jesus did. Because the highest calling for us is not to get on the Dean’s List or get the best job or marry the perfect spouse or have the greatest kids or the most recognition. The highest calling both in a marriage and within all human relationships is to serve as Jesus serves us.

The symbol for our faith is the cross. People wear beautiful crosses around their necks. But a cross did not mean that in Jesus’ time. To see a cross was like seeing police officers carrying around automatic weapons. It was like being in the room where they have the electric chair or inject the lethal dose. It would send chills up your spine. It was the symbol of the most humiliating form of death. But it is the death that Jesus chose to take our place in service to us. So as we make the sign of the

cross, the sign made over us in baptism, we are claiming loyalty to Jesus. We are following Him as we submit to one another in His love.

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