

STUDY 10 | EPHESIANS 5:21-33

RE-ALIGNED

The first word of this passage would be enough to cause most people in our Western culture to pause or give up reading altogether: ‘submit.’ Particularly in view of the value our culture places on individual freedom of choice – at the cost of virtually anything or anyone else, it’s worth focussing our attention on what ‘submit’ means in biblical perspective and practice.

The Greek word (*hypotassomai*), when broken down to its principle parts, means ‘to order oneself under’ something or someone else (BDAG, 1042). We get such English words as *taxonomy* (*tasso*) from the thought conveyed. The word describes a person recognising a pattern or order that God has knitted into the fabric of creation, and then that person making a personal, conscious decision to align themselves within that pattern and act according to the role God has given them. The form of the word also conveys that this is not an order or role enforced upon an individual against their will, but is a choice freely made by the individual for the sake of another. In the New Testament we read that part of God’s liberating salvation involves enabling believers to submit to the authority of the Spirit (Romans 8:7-10; cf. 10:3), as well as commanding believers submit to governing authorities (Romans 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1). It is the pattern for wives toward husbands (Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5), and Christian slaves toward their earthly masters (Titus 2:9).

It’s worth noting Paul did not invent the idea of submission. Although we don’t find the same word used by our Lord, the concept of submission actually finds its origin in Jesus’ own thinking throughout the gospels, revealing that the idea of submission actually originated in the eternal council of the triune Godhead. The mission of God the Son as Saviour involved submission to the will of his Father in heaven (John 4:34; 5:30; 17:4; Luke 22:42), as well as his earthly parents (Luke 2:51). To disregard the Bible’s teaching on submission, therefore, is to deny a central characteristic of the Trinitarian God whom Christian believers confess (1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 13:14), and after whom all humankind is created, and his people redeemed, to reflect his image (Genesis 1:26-28; cf. Ephesians 4:24). As the pattern built into the order of creation by a good God, the pattern itself is therefore inherently good, and yields blessings when all are aligned with its purpose. But like all aspects of fallen creation, it is also a pattern prone to distortion and destruction through human selfishness and violence.*

*If you or someone you know finds themselves in a situation of domestic abuse, contact 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732). If you or they are in immediate danger do not hesitate to call 000.

A NEW HUMANITY

The instruction for wives to submit to their husbands no less means they are in any way inferior to their husbands as it would mean God the Son is inferior to God the Father in his submission.

On the contrary, **wives** are dignified by the Son in his humanity and for the Son in his divinity, in their submission to their husbands.

Husbands are called to no lesser a standard of love than that modelled by the self-giving sacrifice of their Lord and Saviour.

To this end, by God’s grace, the community of God’s people strive and so model the goodness of the gospel and the glory of the Godhead in marriage.

We see instead in Ephesians 5:21-33 that relationships of submission flow out of self-giving, sacrificial love. The source and primary reason for our submission ‘to one another’ is our ‘reverance for Christ’ (v 21). This pattern is then reflected first in the marital relationship: wives to husbands (v 22). Note the numbers: three and a half verses on the wife submitting to her husband (vv 22-24, 33b), followed by eight and a half verses on the husband loving (x 4), feeding, caring for and uniting with, his wife (vv 25-33a). Husbands are given the upper and lower parameters of the standard of marital love: servant-hearted leadership modeled by our sacrificial Saviour (vv 25b,-27), and the second of the greatest commandments to love his wife as he loves himself (vv 28, 33a; cf. Matthew 22:37-40). That human marriage is therefore a ‘profound mystery’ (v 32), means that its function of pointing to Christ’s loving relationship with his people would not otherwise be known unless God revealed it in the unifying and sanctifying gospel (cf. Eph 3:3-6).

GETTING STARTED

1. What thoughts or feelings come to mind when you hear the word ‘submit’?
2. When is submission to an authority a requirement for the benefit of society?

INTO THE TEXT

3. It has been a few weeks since we were last in Ephesians. See if, as a group, you can summarise what Paul has written from the beginning to 5:20.

READ EPHESIANS 5:21

4. What is the source or reason for submitting to one another? What might this look like?

READ EPHESIANS 5:22-24

5. What reason does Paul give, for wives to submit to their own husbands?
6. What has Paul already written about how Christ relates to his body, the church? How does this in fact dignify the wife's role, as well as the community of God's redeemed people?

READ EPHESIANS 5:25-33

7. What is the standard of love expected from the husband in marriage? How is this love demonstrated towards his wife?
8. What does Paul mean by marriage reflecting Christ's love being 'a profound mystery'? (See Ephesians 3:3-6)

TAKE AWAY

9. What impacts might we see on the wider life of our church community, if husbands loved their wives in the ways described in this passage?
10. How can we all – whether married or single – cultivate an attitude of submission to one another 'out of reverence for Christ' (v 21)? What might this look like in the ways we relate to one another?