

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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Hilarious Hupotasso

am, Holy Communion

The Text

Ephesians 5:21-32

submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives and Husbands

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

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This guy was walking along a beach in California when he found an old bottle lying on the sand. He picked it up and rubbed it to get some of the sand off it. Then, whoosh – a genie appeared from the bottle. The genie said to the man, I am a very special genie. I can only grant you one wish but as I am very powerful I can grant wishes that no other genie can grant. Ha, said the guy, I've always wanted to go to Hawaii but I'm terribly afraid of flying so I can't even get into a plane and if I go on a boat I get awfully seasick - so - can you build me a bridge to Hawaii?

Well, said the genie looking thoughtful, that bridge would be very difficult, the water is very deep, and it would need permits from the Department of the Navy and the Department of Transportation and from the State of Hawaii and the State of California - that's getting too difficult even for a genie as powerful as me. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll grant you another wish! OK, said the guy, I'm always having trouble communicating with my wife - can you tell me how to understand women?

H'mm... said the genie, how many lanes would you like on that bridge?¹

Men understanding women, and women understanding men now here is something that requires great wisdom. Nowhere is the need for this kind of mutual understanding more required than in the marriage relationship. And while the genie had no words of wisdom for the man, the apostle Paul, while no genie, is very wise. He can help give us direction that can assist in better knowing one's spouse.

In the passage read from Ephesians five we have one of those texts that is controversial because all that is heard from the passage are the phrases:

"Wives be subject to your husbands in everything"

and

"The husband is the head of the wife".

Now if this is all that is heard in this text then there will be an increasing divide between husbands and wives and less understanding and trust. Yet, while it is true the text contains the words I have just

¹ I am grateful to my friend Graham Jones who told me this joke on Friday May 2nd 2008.

quoted, when understood contextually you will see there is nothing in this passage that supports the domination/subordination image often evoked by these verses. Rather this is a passage that will give us insight into how husbands and wives can understand each other better as they apply what is said here in Ephesians.

So this morning I want to answer three questions.

The questions are these:

1. What does it mean to be subject to one another
2. What does it mean for wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord?
3. What does it mean for husbands to exercise headship?

So let's begin with the question:

What does it mean to be subject to one another?

In verse 21 Paul says that Christians are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This is the interpretive key to help us understand what he says in the following verses. The wife's willing submission and the husband's loving exercise of headship are the complimentary ways a couple is subject to one another.

One of the ways we revere and honour Jesus is by mutual submission. You will notice throughout this passage that Paul always directs how we are to treat each other by referring back to Jesus. Wives are to be subject to their husbands as they are to the Lord and husbands are the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. To live in mutual submission is a way to worship Jesus, which is the meaning of the word "reverence". What Paul has in mind here is that Christians are to reject self-centredness and work for the good of others. Submission is nothing more than a decision about the relative worth of others.

As Klyne Snodgrass has commented in his book on Ephesians:

Our society emphasizes equality, but mutual submission is a much stronger idea. With equality you still have a battle for rights. Equality can exist without love, but it will not create Christian Community. With mutual submission we give up rights and support each other. Mutual submission is love in action. It brings equal valuing and is a power by which a Christian community establishes itself."

But in order to be subject to each other, we need to understand what it means to be subject to Jesus.

Mutual submission means being full of the Spirit. We can't be full of the Spirit until we realize we need the Spirit. With our own spirits and our own hearts we cannot serve God, so we receive the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit of God, it is impossible to submit in the sense the Bible calls us to submit. Romans says the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God.²

The basis of submission is submitting ourselves to one another, or "giving way" to one another. Submission is giving way to somebody else. Before we can hope to be good husbands or wives, we must learn to be good Christians. We must all become self-sacrificial and submissive."

So let us now move on to our second question:

What does it mean for wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord?

It is worth noting that in the Greek the word "submission" is not used in verse 22, but implied. Therefore a literal translation of verses 21 and 22 would go something like this:

subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives (be subject) to your own husbands as to the Lord.

That the use of the verb "subject" is implied shows us that Paul is connecting verse 22 with verse 21. It is not only the wife who is to be subject. What Paul will show is how in marriage a wife and husband both are to live out verse 21.

Let me put into my own words what I think Paul is saying here about the how a wife is to be subject to her husband.

² Romans 8.7

Submission is the divine calling of a wife to respect and affirm her husband's headship as she partners with him in a sacramental life that enables them to live as a kingdom couple in a fallen world.

If we think of the head as somehow depicting the husband's position within the body of marriage than we can say that the wife's role is like that of the neck. The neck is under the head and assists the head in every way. Without the neck the head would be useless. Can you imagine a head resting on top of the shoulders without the neck joining the head to the rest of the body?

The neck is as important as the head. Think of it this way. The head is that part of the anatomy that seeks to direct the rest of the body as it is the centre of thinking, hearing, seeing. The neck provides the body with its nurture as oxygen is taken in, food and drink consumed so that the body can thrive. Now no one would say that the head is more important than the neck. They are equally necessary if the body is to function well. If either is sick the whole body will suffer.

May I suggest that Paul wants us to see that wives are co-equal with their husbands and just as the neck partners with the head she is to partner with her husband. She has the opportunity to help bring to life a relationship where the values of the Kingdom of God are expressed within the home. She does this particularly by her fulfilling the vital function of nurturing the body life of the marriage. By doing this she helps to bring to life a community where the interaction of the husband, wife and children is a visible sign of Jesus' presence. This is a sacramental life which she is nurturing so that signs of the kingdom find expression in a fallen world.

Marriage you see is to be sacramental. This means that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. This is made very clear here in Ephesians when Paul says that marriage is a copy of the original love Jesus has for his Church. Jesus' interaction with the church is the greater reality and marriage is a metaphor that is meant to be a tangible expression of the relationship Jesus has to the church.

The Bible says that the Church is the body of Christ and in this passage from Ephesians the calling of the wife is parallel to that of the church. This is clearly stated in verse 24 where we read: "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

How does the Church submit to Jesus?

As we consider again our text from Ephesians this is clearly indicated by the grammar used in reference to the verb submit. The verb *submit* means "place yourself in submission." This kind of submission is an act of the will rather than a legal requirement. You need to understand that for women of Paul's day it would have been a legal requirement to submit. The legal role of a woman could arbitrarily be exercised by her mate or father without her consent and against her will. A father could sell his daughter as a servant, as if she was a piece of property.

This is not what Paul is after here at all. Paul was after a heart attitude, a spirit of humility by choice, not coercion. Paul is pro-choice where women are concerned: the choice to lay down their lives for their brothers, sisters, husbands, and children, because they have laid it down for Christ.

Paul made decision-makers out of those who were forbidden to make decisions. What an incredible opportunity for the Christian wife in Paul's time. The letter to the Ephesians elevates the concept. You say, "It does? Elevating the concept of submission still smacks of servility to me."

But look at the text: "Wives submit." The word is *hupotasso*. This word means to rank under, to take your post. It's a military term. How are wives to do this? As they submit to the Lord. How are Christians to submit to the Lord? Willingly, gladly, voluntarily, and with abandon. That's how we submit to the Lord, and that's how wives are to submit to my husband—not because they must but because they may. Not because they have to, but because they get to. There's a difference and such submission is akin to how the church is to submit to Christ.

So far we have answered the question: What does it mean to be subject to one another? and, What does it mean for wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord? We now turn to the third question:

What does it mean for husbands to exercise headship?

Again let me give a definition of what I think this term means given what Paul says in the passage:

Headship is the divine calling of a husband to take primary responsibility for Christ-like loving servant leadership within the home, especially in how he relates to his wife.

Now this word husband is an interesting one. It literally means "house-band" Picture in your mind if you will a huge elastic band or cord that is stretched around a house, symbolically holding it together. This is an image that we can keep in our mind as we think of how a husband is to submit to his wife. A husband's submission is a binding submission that is to assist the marriage relationship and the family to be bound together. If husbands love their wives as the Lord shows us here there will be an opportunity for unity and coherence in the home. Conversely if the elastic is broken and the husband does not fulfill his calling as a binding agent then the marriage and home life will not be all that God desires.

In the text from Ephesians notice that Paul says at the heart of the husband's submission is the call to love his wife. This is mentioned in verse 25 and again in verse 32:

"husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church" (verse 25)

"let each one of you love his wife as himself" (verse 32)

Notice the conjunction used in both verses, it is "as". Paul means therefore that husbands are to love their wives every bit as much as Christ loves the Church. Husbands are to love their wives equally to how they love themselves.

The word Paul uses for "love" here is the word "agape". This is the type of love that describes God's love and is most fully described in 1 Corinthians 13:

A husband never gives up.
A husband cares more for his wife than for self.
A husband doesn't want what he doesn't have.
A husband doesn't strut,
A husband doesn't have a swelled head,
A husband doesn't force himself on his wife,
A husband is not always "me first,"
A husband doesn't fly off the handle,
A husband does not keep score of the sins of his wife,
A husband takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
A husband puts up with anything,
A husband trusts God always,
A husband always looks for the best in his wife,

A husband never looks back,
A husband keeps going to the end.

So do you see what headship means for the Apostle Paul? It has nothing to do with domination and everything to do with taking the lead in exhibiting the love of God within the home and particularly as such love pertains to his wife. When this kind of love is operative such a man will be a house band because as the Apostle John says: "Perfect love casts out fear". It is true that while no husband loves perfectly, as men grow in loving in the way I have just described will the home not become more and more a safe haven?

Although time does not permit me to go into detail about these three, please notice that the love Paul describes will be relayed by husbands towards their wives in three ways and by so doing they will be exercising headship:

This is a sacrificial love:

A love that is sacrificial is described by Paul in verse 25 in this way: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" As Christ loved the church so husbands are to love their wives. Husbands are to love sacrificially by giving themselves to their wives. Although there are many ways in which this can find expression for now I will try and suggest one. Such a sacrificial love will be one where husbands choose to engage his wife in conversation with the sharing of his inner life. This is something that men often find very challenging indeed and is something this man and husband has had to cultivate. (I am referring to myself here) However as we learn the way of honest disclosure towards our wives we will be giving ourselves to them in ways that will be a sacrificing of ourselves towards the one we love.

This is a purifying love: Jesus' love was purifying:

Paul says in verses 26 and 27: "that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

It is one of the remarkable truths of Ephesians that God's plan in Christ is to unite all things and bring all of creation into a perfect harmony. As we live in the present this is something that is very hard to imagine. And yet Paul would have us understand that as husbands

there is a call on the Christian man to care for his wife in such a way that he is enabling her to become all that God calls her to be.

I know that for in each circumstance this will look different. I am aware that in my own life I have understood that part of what this has meant for me in my relationship with Peggy is to assist her vocationally. She is a doctor and while believe me, she does not want my help from the medical side of things, I have been privileged from the first day she started medical school to support her through the years of training as I encourage listen and take an interest in what she is doing.

I think that this is something that husbands are called to do. Take an active interest in our wives' professional, spiritual and personal maturing and developing. By so doing we are able to be men of encouragement as we see our beloved partners serving the Lord through the gifts they have been given and have developed over the years.

I would also suggest that such a purifying love is one that is learning to talk honestly and caringly about the challenges and conflicts that exist in any marriage. There are times I have known in my work as a pastor when it is the wife who is more inclined to take the initiative in dealing with these problem areas. However the text from Ephesians would suggest that it is the husband whose role is to reflect that of Jesus in enabling the relationship to become more pure and spotless so that the unity in marriage is a foreshadowing of the cosmic unity of which the apostle writes in chapter 1.

This is a nurturing love

Thirdly Paul says that this is to be a nurturing love.

"no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church"(verse 29)

The word Paul uses for "cherish" is a word picture that means to soften and warm with body heat. It is the kind of emotional warmth that that leads to gentle and tender attention. This word means to create a warm environment for growth and is the word that would be used in describing a mother bird sitting on her nest incubating and carefully guarding her eggs.

Husbands are to cherish their wives in this kind of way and so provide warm and soft place. Of course wives also provide this for their husbands but again the Apostle seems to be affirming that men are called to initiate this kind of atmosphere in the home so that the love he mentioned in verses 25 and 32 is expressed in very practical and caring ways.

Application

So, how does this now relate to you and me in the twentieth first century century? I believe that true submission leads to liberty. Richard Foster says, "Submission leads to liberty, the liberty to be able to let go the terrible weight and burden of always needing to get my own way." I believe submission is self-denial. It says, "My happiness does not depend on my getting what I want."

In 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul is talking about giving money. He says there are three ways to give. You can give grudgingly, of necessity, or hilariously—cheerfully. The word in Greek is *hilaros*. I have discovered I can submit grudgingly because I have to or because that is how it is. Or I can choose to submit first to Christ and then to my wife or husband and then to you and then to my world, to my children, to my grandchildren, to the traffic man, and to whomever I have to submit to. I can do it. It's a hilarious thing. It's freedom.

As Peggy will tell you I am always misplacing my car and house keys and even lost them recently. I had to get another set made. These keys can be replaced. However there is a much more important key that we need to always keep track of if our marriages are to be all that God intends them to be. It is the key of our commitment to Christ and to each other. For it is this key that unlocks the door for both husband and wife to hilarious *hupotasso*. A selfless, giving life leads to the liberty of living, for husband and wife, a joyous death to selfishness, a yielded will. That gives new warmth and color to a marriage cold and plain. Hilarious *hupotasso* is the way to start again.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives. Nourish and cherish them as Christ loved and cherished and gave himself for the church. To all of us who are married Paul says: submit ye, one to another out of reverence for Christ.