

Hope Christian Church  
Todd Cravens  
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## Sermon Series: *The Book of Ephesians*



# Submitting... Out of Reverence for Christ

## Part 1: Wives Submit to Your Own Husbands

### **(Ephesians 5:15-24 ESV)**

*Reader:* Carol Simpson

<sup>15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

<sup>22</sup> *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* <sup>23</sup> *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.* <sup>24</sup> *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

## Introduction

The last three verses which Carol just read, starting with the words “*wives, submit to your own husbands...*” may fit into the top ten most controversial words in the whole Bible. Verses 22-24 will our focal passage this morning. However, any discussion of these three verses that treats these words as if they were written as a tweet on Twitter rather than as a paragraph in a parchment letter, will fail to rightly understand them. Yet this is exactly the way these words have been treated for the last hundred years.

Plucking verses out of the context in which they were written always leads to misunderstanding and misapplication, which in turn can ultimately lead to harm and heresy. If we want to rightly understand verses 22-24, then we must back up to and begin in verse 15. We must remind ourselves where we’ve been before we head off to where we’re going.

If you’re going on vacation to California and you live in Massachusetts, you don’t begin in Kansas. If you want to rightly understand a certain word in a sentence, you don’t begin with a dictionary. You begin by striving to understand the sentence in which you find the word. In order to understand the sentence, you must read and understand the paragraph in which it is found. Then you go to the dictionary and examine that range of meanings of a word in order to get at the exact meaning of the word.

These words in verses 22-24 have often been handled as if their intended meaning was to subjugate women and exalt men. But we must ask the question, “Is this what Paul intended? Is this the reason why Paul wrote these words? Or was he aiming at something else?” To rightly understand these words, we must understand the context in which they were written. Context is King in determining meaning of a biblical text.

## Getting the Context

Two weeks ago we focused our time on verses 15-21, but we particularly zeroed in on verse 16 where Paul instructed the Ephesians to “**make the best use of time, because the days are evil.**” We learned that making the best use of time involved three things;

- 1) by living wisely, not unwisely (v.15),
- 2) by living according to the will of God, not living foolishly (v.17), and
- 3) by being filled with the Holy Spirit, not being filled with wine (v.18).

Paul then offered a brief thumbnail sketch, in verses 19-21, of what life looks like being filled with the Holy Spirit. He noted three things. The Spirit-filled life marked,

- 1) by song & music directed toward another and toward God(v.19),
- 2) by consistent thanksgiving in all things(v.20),
- 3) and submission (v.21).

Submission now becomes the dominate theme which carries Paul's writing forward. Please note that he is describing the life of the person filled with the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 21.

### Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)

<sup>21</sup> *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

## Submitting

The verb 'submit' (Greek *hypotassō*) means "to submit to the orders or directives of someone over you in authority—to obey."<sup>1</sup> For example, it is often used of soldiers in an army submitting to officers over them who are of superior rank. In the active voice, it means "to place under or to subordinate."<sup>2</sup> In the passive voice (or middle), it means "to willingly order oneself under a leader; to submit oneself voluntarily."<sup>3</sup> In this instance, in v.21, Paul writes the verb in the middle voice, or the passive voice. This tells us that he has in mind a kind of submitting that is *voluntary* not forced. Paul is saying that the kind of submission he is thinking about is one that we are to willingly choose to embrace and not some kind of forced or coerced submission.

## Out of Reverence for Christ

This voluntary submitting he says is to be directed "to one another **out of reverence for Christ.**" The Greek wor here translated 'reverence' is *phobos* (φόβος). You recognize the word. The word is 'fear.' It means "to have a profound awe and respect for God."<sup>4</sup> The kind of submission Paul is here calling for is the kind that flows outward to one another from an inward awe-filled respect and *reverence* (ESV, NIV) or *fear* (KJV, NASB) for Christ.

Clearly submission to Christ remains uppermost in his mind. The impulse that stands behind this submission is an overarching desire to be obedient to Christ. A holy respect and reverential fear for Christ is the necessary heartbeat of this voluntary submission.

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 467.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 399.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Louw and Nida, 540.

## To One Another

Much debate has also centered on the phrase “**submitting to one another.**” Some have seen in this phrase the elimination of all hierarchical relationships. Those who hold to this interpretation understand this as a mutual submission such that all believers are to be equally submissive to each other. However, this cannot be the meaning, since Paul immediately and very clearly in 5:22 - 6:9 offers us an explanation of exactly what he means by offering three sets of relationships,

1. wives and husbands,
2. children and parents, and
3. servants and masters,.

These three sets of relationships serve as examples and illustrations of the kind of submission he’s talking about. Paul is not talking about mutual submission whereby all Christians are equally submissive to one another. If he were then he would be calling, parents to submit to children, masters to submit to slaves, and husbands to submit to wives. He clearly is not doing this. What he is saying is that when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit, he or she will be able to willingly submit to those who are in authority over them no matter what relationship that authority is found in.

The first place where submission would be most clearly seen in the lives of his readers, is in the home. Paul is using home life to illustrate Spirit filled submission. And in consistent form, he offers three sets of relationships which serve as examples of how Holy Spirit enabled submission is to be lived out in everyday life.

## No Believer is Exempt from Submitting

The first observation is that he leaves no one out. No one escapes this call to submit. Within the family of God *no one is exempt from submission to someone*. All of God’s children are called to willingly live within the context of submission. The Spirit-filled life is a life that must be content with the idea and expression of biblical submission. This is a calling that each of us must choose to willingly embrace.

## Wives to Husbands

The first relationship within the home which he notes is the relationship between husband and wife.<sup>5</sup> He first turns to the submission of wife to her own husband (vs. 22-24 - three verses). This is the relationship we will focus on this morning. Then, Paul turns to the husband’s

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<sup>5</sup> This relationship is the fundamental building block of human society. This relationship is the only arena where, according to the expressed will of God, the growth and multiplication of the human race is to take place (Gn 1:28; 9:1). The relationship, between husband and wife—within the context of covenant marriage, is the only relationship God intended for the blessing of sexual fulfillment to find expression. Jesus publicly affirmed this to his followers (Mt 19:3-9).

submission to Christ (vs. 25-33 - eight verses). We will look at this next week. It is interesting that Paul offers about 30 words regarding the wife's submission to her husband, while tripling that number in offering over 100 words regarding the husband's submission to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

## Children to Parents

The second relationship within the home to which he turns is the relationship between parents and children. Paul instructs children to submit to their parents (6:1-4) while particularly instructing fathers not to provoke, or intentionally irritate their children.

## Servants to Masters

The third and final relationship within the home is that between servants and their masters (6:5-9). Paul calls on servants to submit to their masters while reminding earthly masters that they too have a master in heaven and therefore should not be abusive of their servants. We'll look at these two relationships in two weeks on Sunday, August 30.

I would encourage you to come back for the next two weeks. And if you happen to miss one week, then either download my sermon notes (which I will post on the website as a PDF), or download the sermon, or subscribe to the Podcast. This is the first of a three-part mini-series. I pray the Lord will use all three of these weeks to provoke us on toward the holiness to which we are both called and destined.<sup>7</sup>

## Wives Submit to Your Own Husbands

### **(Ephesians 5:22-24 ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* <sup>23</sup> *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.* <sup>24</sup> *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

Note first what is *not* being commanded. This is not a call for all women to submit to all men. This is not what Paul is writing and this is not what God expects. He is not calling married women to submit to all men. He is calling wives to submit to their own husbands. He is calling one wife, to submit to one man—the one man who is her husband.

## Verb Supplied from Previous Verse

It should be noted that there is no verb in this phrase (v.22). Because of this many interpreters have concluded that Paul is not really calling wives to submit to husbands. However, the verb is understood to be supplied from the previous verse. Remember, these two phrases follow each other. Here's how it literally reads:

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 409.

<sup>7</sup> Eph 1:4; 4:1; cf. 1 Ptr 1:15.

<sup>21</sup> *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

<sup>22</sup> *Wives, to your own husbands...*

Wives, what “to your own husbands?” It’s very clear. “Wives, *submit* to your own husbands.” Paul assumes his reader will have just read the sentence before and will of course understand that there is no need to repeat the verb. Parchment is precious and not inexpensive. Where one can be economic with words, one ought to be. There’s no need to rewrite the verb in the example of illustrating it’s action.

## How Should Wives Submit?

How should wives submit? Wives should submit to their own husbands **as to the Lord**. Just as wives would submit to the Lord, so also wives should submit to your own husbands. Wives who so submit themselves to their husbands are doing so out of respect for Jesus. And as we have seen before, this is to be a willing submission, not forced submission.

This goes without saying, but women, this clearly means that choosing a husband should be a well considered endeavor. Girls, don’t get involved with a man who is not himself submitted to Jesus. We’ll get to the call for men next week, but ladies, you don’t want to be submitted to a man who is not first submitted to Christ. It’s another sermon for another day on what to do if you are, but suffice it to say that both Peter<sup>8</sup> and Paul<sup>9</sup> speak to this issue.

## Why Should Wives Submit to Husbands?

Why should wives submit to their own husbands? Because husbands are more capable? No. Because husbands are more worthy? No. It has nothing to do with those kinds of reasons. Paul explains in verse 23.

**Ephesians 5:23 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> *For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body...*

What does this mean? Paul has used the word ‘head’ in two other places in this letter. The first is in 1:22 and the second is in 4:15. In both instances, the term ‘head’ refers to one who has authority or rules over another.

**(Ephesians 1:22 ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> *And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,*

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<sup>8</sup> (1 Peter 3:1-2 ESV) *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, <sup>2</sup> when they see your respectful and pure conduct.*

<sup>9</sup> (1 Corinthians 7:13 ESV) <sup>13</sup> *If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. See also v.16.*

(Ephesians 4:15 ESV)

<sup>15</sup> *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,*

Both of these instances in the use of the word 'head' refer to Christ, however, Paul here uses it for the first time to refer to 'husband.' Paul doesn't here explain why he does this, but he does in other places and it has to do with the order of creation.

(1 Corinthians 11:3 ESV)

<sup>3</sup> *But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.*

(1 Corinthians 11:8-9 ESV)

<sup>8</sup> *For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.*

Paul understands headship to be rooted in the created order.<sup>10</sup> Headship has nothing to do with men being superior to women in any way or women being inferior to men. Headship follows because of the the order in which God created. This is something for which God is completely responsible. The fact that it is right in the eyes of God for wives to submit to their husbands has nothing to do with any kind of value assessment, but does have everything to do with the order in which he chose to create male and female. But these roles have nothing to say about whether or not men are superior to women.

In fact, Paul uses the same word, 'submit,' in 1 Cor 15:28 to describe the relationship of Jesus to God the Father. He writes that Jesus is submitted to God the Father. Does this imply some sense of inherent inferiority? No. This fact proves that the verb can be used without there being any inherent sense of inferiority on the part of the one who is subordinate. This word 'submit' simply describes the role and the response of wives to husbands. Paul then summarizes in verse 24.

Ephesians 5:24 (ESV)

<sup>24</sup> *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.*

Paul brings to mind the way in which the church is to submit to Christ, which is ***in everything***. This raises difficult questions, probably more questions than we have time to answer. For example, should a wife submit her husband when she disagrees with him? Should she submit to her husband when she knows he's making a bad decision? Where these questions absent from Paul's mind when he wrote verse 24? Was the Holy Spirit somehow uninformed in how

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<sup>10</sup> See also 1 Tim 2:11-13; Gn 2:18-25.

complex our lives would be in 2015 when He inspired Paul to write 'in everything?' Did Paul really mean that a wife should submit to her own husband just like the church submits to Christ? Could this really be God's will?

Should a wife submit to her husband when he decides to sin? No. Remember who is Lord and who is not. Jesus is Lord and husband is not. Biblical submission flows out of a reverence for Christ, not a reverence for husband. Christ is to remain uppermost. When the will of man strives to usurp the will of God, it is always the first calling of the Christian to submit to the will of God **out of reverence for Christ.**

The meaning of these words in verses 22-24 is not hard to understand. It's just hard to accept. The reason it's hard to accept is because many of us have been the victims of the abuse of those in authority over us. We have been demeaned and belittled by persons in authority. However, we must remember that we live in a fallen world filled with broken people. Nevertheless "authority is not synonymous with tyranny."<sup>11</sup>

Certainly there are some men who abuse this authority and this role. Men are not demigods. Come back next week and you'll discover Paul has far more to say about the role of men in leading than he does to women in submitting.

The men who abuse their role will one day stand before Jesus and give an account of their stewardship of this responsibility. In the meantime, the men who rightly understand this calling must hold accountable the men who abusing this trust. We as elders understand that we are shepherds over all who are members of this church. Wives, if your husband is abusing his role, then we need to have a conversation and you should know that we have stepped in and removed an abusive man from the home in order to protect an abused women.

We ought not to be deceived. God will not be mocked. Scripture all that is hidden will one day be brought to light. God sees the hearts of all of us. He knows the motivations of each one of us.

For every person in this room, you are each under some sort of authority. Whether you are wife or husband, child or parent, employee or supervisor. Everyone of us must live in submission to those above us. The only way we will be able to do that and do it rightly is through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Are you filled with the Holy Spirit?

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 412.

By whose power was Jesus able to say in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will but Yours be done?" How was he able to submit to the will of his Father? How will you be able to submit to the will of God in your life rather than to your own will? Answer: it will only be by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is the calling of every follower of Jesus to be able to willingly chose to say, "Not my will but Yours be done." We will never do this without the help of the Holy Spirit. The calling of the Christian life is one that cannot be fulfilled apart from the divine, indwelling presence of God's own Holy Spirit. It was the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that purchase that privilege for us.