

Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9

There is probably more potential for controversy packed into one passage than just about anywhere in the Bible. Right in the first verse, Paul tells wives to submit to husbands – and I may lose some of you right there. (The Bible is sexist!) If that wasn't bad enough, later on, he tells slaves to obey masters. (So the Bible advocates slavery!) The only worse place in the Bible must be a parallel passage in Colossians, where Paul takes all the controversy here that he spreads out over 21 verses here and condenses it all down into 8. We'll be there in a couple months and for some people it will seem like 8 verses of pure bombardment on all of their finer tastes.

Sometimes submission to God requires submission in earthly relationships. In those cases, whether we are in authority or under authority, we need to fulfill our God-given roles as if we are directly serving Him.

- I. Submission or Obedience in General
- II. Wives and Husbands 5:22-33
- III. Children and Parents 6:1-4
- IV. Servants and Masters 6:5-9

I. Submission or Obedience in General.

- A. **Submit** old military figure “to line up under” (Robertson). Thayer includes:
 - a. to arrange under, to subordinate
 - b. to subject one's self, obey
 - c. to submit to one's control
- B. There is no sense of inferiority implied here. Nor is it saying that anyone should adopt an intimidating or abusive stance toward others – quite the opposite as we'll see shortly. Submission is the attitude Christians are supposed to take toward governmental authorities. (See **Rom. 13**, where same word is used). In that case we don't really imagine that our elected officials or police officers are all better people than everyone else; we simply comply with the law in order to let them do their job. If they abuse their authority or position, someone may have to call them out on it. But no one really believes that total anarchy is the way to a better world.
- C. First appearance in the NT is about Jesus and His attitude toward Joseph and Mary.

Luke 2:51 NKJV *Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and **was subject** to them...*

If the Son of God was able to subject Himself to his flawed and fallen earthly parents, there must be a way we can do this and have it be OK.

- D. The concept of **obedience** is related to submission, but is less of a general attitude and more of a readiness to respond to specific orders or instructions. It has to do with coming under what we hear. Thayer compares it to the response of a porter who responds to a knock at the door.
- E. So with all this up-front understanding, let's dive into the passage itself.

II. Wives and Husbands 5:22-33

A. Wives 5:22-24

- i. Paul teaches us regarding marriage using the examples of Christ and the church and the original created order from Genesis 2. These are not examples which vary by time or culture, so I really think we should still take them seriously.
- ii. The idea of headship is an old way of describing authority.

1 Cor 11:3 NKJV *But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*

- iii. We know that God the Father and Christ the Son are both equally God, so it should be clear to us that the man and woman stand on equal footing in a sense. Both are made in God's image. Both are saved by the same grace. This should be a loving authority and a willing submission – not one dominating the other until she succumbs to his brute force.

B. Husbands 5:25-33

There is no danger that a husband will love a wife too much, provided his love be subordinate to the love of God. The command is, to love her as Christ loved the church. What love has ever been like that? How can a husband exceed it? What did not Christ endure to redeem the church? So should a husband be willing to deny himself to promote the happiness of his wife; to watch by her in sickness, and, if need be, to peril health and life to promote her welfare. Doing this, he will not go beyond what Christ did for the church. He should remember that she has a special claim of justice on him. For him she has left her father's home, forsaken the friends of her youth, endowed him with whatever property she may have, sunk her name in his, confided her honor, her character, and her happiness, to his virtue; and the least that he can do for her is to love her, and strive to make her happy. This was what she asked when she consented to become his; and a husband's love is what she still asks to sustain and cheer her in the trials of life. If she has not this, whither shall she go for comfort? (Barnes Notes on the New Testament)

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III. Children and Parents 6:1-4

- A. Children 6:1-3
- B. Parents 6:4

Exposure of Infants One aspect ancient society that tends to horrify modern people, an aspect that isn't limited to the Romans ... is the practice of abandoning their infants. This is generally known as *exposure* because the infants were exposed to the elements. Not all infants so exposed died. Sometimes these babies were picked up by other families in need of a slave.

“As soon as a child was born, it was laid at its father's feet. If he raised the child in his arms, he was acknowledging as his own and admitting it to all rights and privileges of membership in a Roman family. If he did not take it out, the child was an outcast, without family or protection. If a child was to be disposed of, it was exposed; that is, taken from the house by a slave and left by the roadside.”

<http://www.classicsunveiled.com/romel/html/romechildren.html>

A Christian outlook values children, while still insisting on their obedience. They are to be brought up in the ways of God. Parents will have more influence than anyone on the early development of their children's faith. They should take this responsibility seriously.

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IV. Servants and Masters 6:5-9

Deut 23:15-16 NKJV ¹⁵“You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him.

A. Servants 6:5-7

6:5 **Bondservants or Slaves** composed about one-third of the population of a city like Ephesus. They had limited rights and were subject to exploitation and abuse. Paul point is not so much supporting the abuses of the system of slavery – any more than he is supporting the abuses of the Roman government when he tells Christians to submit to it. He is instead providing instructions to believing masters and slaves regarding their relationship to each other in the Lord. In that way the gospel was allowed to permeate their social and legal culture.

B. Masters 6:8

6:9 **Masters** in the ancient world had the power of life and death over their slaves. The duty of masters and all in authority is to do good to those in submission and not to take advantage of their authority by **threatening** them. There is no **partiality** with the Lord. He will judge both masters and servants fairly. Exploitation of others is not a biblical value.

The result of this approach is that public support for slavery slowly died out through the influence of Christianity. (See ESV Study Bible)

Movie Recommendation: Amazing Grace The story of William Wilberforce

Amazing Grace is hymn by John Newton, who was a former slave ship captain. He was converted to Christianity and later became a pastor.

William Wilberforce was MP from Yorkshire. He underwent a conversion experience and considered leaving politics. John Newton was among those who encouraged him to stay and take on the slave trade as a political cause.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spent time in Georgia in the early years of his ministry and became a staunch abolitionist. He referred to American slavery as “the vilest that ever saw the sun”. He wrote the last letter of his life to Wilberforce encouraging him to continue his work. Wesley died 6 days later. Copy of letter at end of notes.

Human Trafficking Today Of course legal support for slavery is gone – it is illegal. The practice itself still goes on. Human trafficking is second only to drug trafficking as a source of income for organized crime. More people are being held as slaves today than at any other time in history. There are many good organizations that are fighting it.

Conclusions:

- Clearly, exploitation of others is not a biblical value. So why is the idea of godly submission so hard for so many to accept?
 - Frequent abuse of others contributes to a high level of suspicion and misunderstanding of the biblical ideals.
 - Secular philosophy has undermined our trust in a biblical worldview. For example:

“The world itself is the will to power - and nothing else! And you yourself are the will to power - and nothing else!” (Friedrich Nietzsche)
 - Neither biblical submission to others nor the proper use of biblical authority can be understood until we willingly submit ourselves to God.
 - **Our marriages will benefit from biblically-based relationships.** The fact that a teaching is not popular is no reason to discard it. According to the Bible, the man is the spiritual head of the family, and his wife should acknowledge his leadership. But real spiritual leadership involves service. Just as Christ gave Himself for the church, so the husband is to give up his life for his wife. A wise and Christ-honoring husband will not take advantage of his leadership role, and a wise and Christ-honoring wife will not try to undermine her husband’s leadership. The husband needs to use his leadership to lead his home in faithfully following Christ.
 - **Parents: Don’t be the cause of frustration in your kids.** The purpose of parental discipline is to help children grow, not to exasperate or discouragement. Parenting is not easy. It takes lots of patience to raise children in a loving, Christ-honoring manner. Raise them to love the Lord. Set such an example for them that they will want to do so.
 - **Employers and employees are ultimately responsible to Christ.** Paul’s instructions encourage responsibility and integrity on the job. Christian employees should do their jobs as if Jesus Christ were their supervisor. Christian employers should treat their employees fairly and with respect. Can you be trusted to do your best, even when the boss is not around? Do you work hard and with enthusiasm? Do you treat your employees as people, not machines? Whether we are employees or employers, the One you ultimately should want to please is your Father in heaven.

- **Finally** The principles in this passage apply today in terms of submission to any lawfully constituted authority. The only exception will be if such a lawfully constituted authority were to abuse their position, for example, by requiring a believer to disobey God's Word or compromise his or her commitment to Christ.

The Last Letter of John Wesley

Balam, February 24, 1791

Dear Sir:

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a "law" in our colonies that the *oath* of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this?

That he who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, dear sir,

Your affectionate servant,

John Wesley