

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Ephesians 5:21-6:9 *"Love And Respect"*

Paul's appeal to the Ephesian Christians to *"live a life worthy of your calling"* is focused on reconciliation and unity - these are God's purposes for the church and the world - and he now moves into what it takes to have a unified *household*. Like the Church, the united *"body of Christ,"* the Christian household should be an example to the surrounding culture of God's reconciling work. Remember too that in the 1st century, almost all churches were *"house churches;"* so if the local Christians are meeting in your house to worship and study and feast, your household should be an example to other Christians!

The *"household code"* that Paul describes was as familiar to the Ephesian Christians as his earlier injunctions about avoiding sexual immorality or drunkenness - they knew these rules already, not only from the Christian teaching they had had, but because similar codes were common in Greco-Roman society. To be told *"Wives obey your husbands, children obey your parents, slaves obey your masters"* was to hear only what everyone in that culture believed was normal.

Two things make Paul's Christian version of the household code different - Christian - the *motivation*, and the *modifications* he brings in. The motives are that Christians should do these things *"out of reverence for Christ," "as to the Lord," "as Christ did for you," "as you would*

do for Christ." The modifications are summed up in the introductory command *"Submit to one another."* There is mutual responsibility in the Christian community. Each household instruction is a pair of reciprocal commands: for husbands as well as wives, fathers as well as sons, masters as well as slaves.

So *"filled with the Spirit... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"* point to the major distinctives of the Christian household. Of course these Christians are still embedded in Greco-Roman culture, and Paul has no interest in having the Christian community cause social chaos by upending everything. So Paul does not attack, nor does he *endorse* patriarchy, or slavery; he simply takes them as the social conditions in which the gospel has to work - much as today pastors don't endorse divorce, but we know it is part of the culture that we live and work and minister in.

In this *"Christian household code,"* you can detect the radical Christian egalitarianism that Paul spelled out in his Galatian letter: *"in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female"* - that before God, and in Christ, these differences mean nothing. So Paul transforms the household codes, and sows the seeds of the gradual dissolution of patriarchy and slavery. One final point of introduction: Paul here addresses *wholly Christian households*. He does not talk about situations where, for

example, the head of the household is not a Christian, or does not behave as one in relation to his wife, children, slaves. That was a serious issue, because in the 1st century many women and slaves became Christians; Paul deals with some of those complex issues in his Corinthian letters.

1) Marriage

What then does Paul commend to the 1st C. former pagans around Ephesus with regard to marriage? Wives should submit to their husbands *“as to the Lord.”* They are not called to obey but to *submit*, meaning a voluntary deference to their husbands; modeled on the way the church submits to Christ.

The standard command to *“obey the head of the household”* - the *pater familias* - which everyone in the 1st C. accepted as normal, is now modified by evoking the image of the Christian community responding to Christ. Christ, they knew, was their provider, their guide, their Savior. He loved them with an unconditional and enduring love. He dealt with them in grace and mercy. Now the Christian wife should see herself in such a relationship to her husband, and gladly and voluntarily defer to him.

Thus the reciprocal command: *“husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church.”* The husband, as a Christian *“head of household,”* now has a major new responsibility - to emulate Christ in relation to his wife. And that of course means *sacrifice: “as Christ gave himself up for her.”* His *“Christian headship”* means providing all that his wife needs to flourish, even as Christ provides for the sanctification and blessing of the Church.

In case the example of Christ does not sufficiently motivate the husband, Paul provides another image: that *“in loving his wife he is loving himself.”* It's in *his interest* to

have a wife who knows she is loved - for obvious reasons - but also because marriage, according to what Jews and Christians have always believed, made them *“one flesh.”* So to care for his wife is exactly to care *“for himself, for his own body.”* And Paul then links that *“appeal to self-interest”* back to the husband's duty to emulate Christ: as Christ loves his own body, the Church, the husband should love his own body, his wife!

So following a deep biblical theme, Paul links the marital relationship to that of Christ and his Church. That is an idea as old as Isaiah's and Hosea's vision of *“Israel is God's bride;”* and that points forward to Revelation's *“wedding supper of the Lamb.”* Marriage mirrors God's loving, intimate relationship with his people. That is why marriage is held in such high esteem in Christianity, and why anything that threatens marriage - from adultery to redefining it - will always be opposed by the Church.

How should we in the 21st century react to these commands? Women who fear that Christianity is hopelessly patriarchal should look more carefully at the New Testament, and at history: compare the roles of women in marriage and in society in *“Christianized”* western nations with their roles in Islamic or Hindu or Confucian cultures. We live in a very different culture from the 1st century, of course, so we do not have to assume the patriarchal backdrop. But those men today who would like to re-establish patriarchy and be *“head of the household,”* should take careful note that a Christian patriarch sacrifices himself for his wife, as Christ did for the church, and does everything needed for her flourishing. Strangely I hear very little about that in modern Christian talk about marriage.

Can wives still *“submit”*? I suspect many more would volunteer to do so if their

husbands were as sacrificial as Paul demands. Remember "submit" is not - at least in English - the same as "obey;" children and slaves should "obey," wives should submit. Paul's conclusion of this "marriage code" is one that I think still bears examination: each of you (husbands) "must love his wife... and the wife must respect her husband."

From my experience in counseling, and in observing marriages, and in being married for 45 years, I would say *love and respect* are exactly what most people are looking for in marriage today. A wife who never feels loved; who never hears "I love you" from her husband, who rarely gets the kind of nourishing, cherishing care that says without words "I love you;" the wife who has no reason to believe that her husband is committed to her welfare (the biblical definition of love); that wife is not only unhappy, but wonders why she is married!

And the husband who gets no respect; who feels that his labors are taken for granted; who is greeted with demands and criticism long before a "welcome home" kiss; a husband who feels unappreciated, like a failure at home, who tries his best but understands that is not good enough - that husband is not a happy man.

Love and respect are needed if a marriage is to flourish and endure. Paul may have lived in a very different culture from ours, but his conclusions suggest that men and women have not changed that much from his time to ours.

2) Parenting and Working

Let us deal briefly with parenting, and with working relationships. The children Paul speaks of are old enough to know they are being addressed, but not yet adults - what we still think of as "school-age" children.

They should obey their parents, and honor them.

Greco-Roman culture put even adult children under the authority of the *paterfamilias*; until their death in Greek tradition, to age 60 (about the same thing) in Roman tradition. Paul sees it differently: young children should obey, all children should honor their parents. Fathers have a two particular Christian responsibilities - "*not to exasperate*" their children, and to teach and guide them in "*the training of the Lord.*"

To "not exasperate" would mean that harsh treatment, provocation, discouragement, "putting down," should not be part of the Christian father's arsenal with his children. They need support, encouragement, training, discipline. They also need to know that Christian training and discussion are not "women's work." Today's teens are much more insecure inside than they want us to know; they are still listening intently even when they have said "you old people know nothing!" In our modern world their insecurities, their need for advanced education to get good jobs, their sense that the working world is very hostile, mean that many of them stay in a prolonged adolescence until they are 30. But they still need training, and encouragement, and hope.

Workplace relationships are no longer based on the master/slave pattern - at least not officially! But too many workers feel like slaves, and too many managers still act like masters. The Christian principles remain the same: "*work as though you were doing it for Christ, and not just when the master is looking.*" Bosses, do not be harsh to your workers, because "*you too have a boss in heaven.*" He sees you and your worker as people of equal worth - you are now "brothers in Christ" - and disdains anyone who treats his worker

as a lesser creature. Mutual respect in the workplace!

All this is designed, says Paul, to create harmonious, reconciled, united Christian communities of every scale that will be examples to the wider society of what God can do and is already doing. That has not changed: Christian households and Christian communities – the Church – are still called to be models of God’s working within and among people. We should all be loving one another, respecting one another, submitting to one another, as part of our Christian lives together.

Our care for one another should emulate that of Jesus Christ, who gave himself totally for us in order to create communities of care, support, nurture; where a newcomer feels welcomed; where every member knows they are loved and respected. Whether that community is a household, or a church, it should feel the same – and can do so if Christ is our motive, our means, our Lord, our guide.

Let us pray...