

## 11th Sunday after Pentecost: "What Is This Submit Thing?"

*Ephesians 5:21-32*

Rev. Sue Melrose | Sermon for Sunday, August 8, 2021

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This month's sermons and Bible studies are based on passages from the Letter to the Ephesians. It is an epistle that is full of exhortations and guidelines for Christian living. Today I will read and consider a portion of what is commonly referred to as "The Household Codes." It is one of the most controversial passages in the Bible for our time—and one which for most of my career in ministry, I NEVER preached on.

But I have to admit, the most troublesome passages of scripture, with study, prayer, and reflection, can provide unexpected insight into Christ and ourselves.

A reading from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, beginning in Chapter 5, verses 21 through 32. Listen now to the Word of God:

*<sup>1</sup> Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.*

*<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup> so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.*

Paul and I received a wedding gift from a cousin of mine who obviously so wanted to give an appropriate gift to give a “clergy couple” – a relatively new phenomena in 1974. She selected a beautifully printed and framed setting of this passage. No, it never hung in our house. We did repurpose the frame.

In my—in our—reluctance, if not outright refusal, to read and consider this passage, we may be, so to speak, tossing out the baby with the bathwater. So, let’s drain the tub and see what is left.

This passage from Ephesians continues after one of my favorite biblical passages in Ephesians: *be filled with the Spirit,<sup>19</sup> as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,<sup>20</sup> giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Then, it is followed by a continuation of the household codes that are even more troubling – directives to slaves: *“obey your earthly masters... as you obey Christ.”*

Household Codes we find in scripture are directives for appropriate behavior, specifically about behavior for Christian families living in the Roman world.

Families in Roman culture were extended far beyond our nuclear families of two generations. In addition to grandparents, it could include aunts and uncles, nieces, and nephews—and slaves. In wealthy Roman homes, even clients were part of the mix. And we all know that the more people, the more complicated the relationships.

The households were clearly hierarchical and patriarchal. A man – the father – the master of the house – was in charge of everyone and everything. Women—wives, mothers, daughters—and slaves—all were property. Certainly not our social structure today!

Our families can be large or small; marriage is no longer restricted by sexual orientation or race – at least legally. But less than half of us

over 15 are married, and many of us live alone. Our “family” is elsewhere. We may be blood related, or not. We might consider our “family” to be our neighbor, our friend, our church family. Our social structures are different.

Christians from what we read in the New Testament and other documents from early church history did not directly challenge the social structure of their time as much as we might have wished. But, there did seem to be some tension. When you also have Paul writing, “In Christ, there is no male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free,” there had to be some tension. When the stories of Jesus are about a man who ministered to and spoke publicly to women without a husband or father present, you cannot help but wonder if everything was wonderful in these hierarchical Christian households.

In fact, some scholars believe the household codes were deliberately placed in Ephesians, Colossians, and the pastoral epistles to placate those who believed Christianity was threatening the established social order. Whether that is true or not, what is clear is that early Christians were not looking at making the social order Christian but seeking how they could make the established social structure more Christian.

I do shudder at the thought that there are those who take the social structure of that time as literally true for ours. We know these words have justified spousal abuse and battery, just as the passages on slaves justified slavery in this nation. The Bible can be twisted—used and abused—in weird ways even now.

So what, if we drain out all the patriarchal parts of this Ephesians passage, what is left? Is there something to say about marriage for those of us who are married – and something to say about human relationships in general for all of us?

The key is in the very first sentence: *Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.* Or as the King James puts it: *Submit to one another out of fear of the Lord.*

Oh, that “submit” word.

Some things to notice. The grammatical set up of most English Bibles have this verse beginning the section on wives and husbands. In Greek editions – and any grammarian can tell us that we can spend all day debating grammar – but the more common arrangement is for this verse to follow that favorite of mine, *Be filled with the Spirit... singing songs... giving thanks ... subjecting ourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ*. The topic isn’t “submission,” but being filled with the Spirit.

Also this word “subject” or, as in the King James, “submit”: One meaning is like “obey,” but when Paul uses this word in his other writings, the context points to another meaning that is “voluntary submission” – submitting ourselves to one another as Christ submitted himself to the cross. No one has said we “have to” submit – but we do, as Christ did, willingly out of reverence for one another.

During Roman times, this voluntary act was a radical statement. Nowhere else are there directives to the husband. But in Ephesians, the word to husbands is nearly three times as long as those to the wife. Roman husbands were subject to no one else in the household. “Be subject to one another” no matter the reason was unheard of. It was radical – and is radical for us in our supposedly more democratic and more egalitarian world: Radical mutuality.

This passage from Ephesians is in our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship of scripture readings appropriate for a wedding. I have not edited that list when I have handed it to couples. But, in my 48 years of ministry, I remember only once, perhaps twice, that a couple selected it to be read during their ceremony.

The one I clearly remember was a couple, a man and woman, both divorced, in their late 40’s/early 50’s. Each one was trying now for the second time—actually, better said, they were committed out of their love for one another and determined to make this marriage work. From my previous conversations with them, I felt that their relationship was solid, that both had grown significantly and learned from their first marriages.

In a nutshell, they were ready. But, it caught me off guard when they came in for their final session with me prior to the wedding and gave me this passage from Ephesians as one of the readings.

I did my pastoral, “Tell me what it is about this passage that speaks to you.” (You know the technique. It is what you say to a four-year-old when she brings in a picture and you don’t have a clue what it is. “Now, honey, tell me about it.”) They knew. They affirmed the mutual regard for one another in the first verse. The bride reminded me about the physical abuse she had suffered in her first marriage. She appreciated the directive to the husband to love himself and to love his wife and her body as he loved his own. Her ex-husband certainly did not respect her body and, given his alcoholism, did not love and care for his own. But this guy she was sitting next to that evening—he got it, and, she added, she “got it” having learned the same for herself and her relationship with her fiancé. This couple made me recognize that just maybe Ephesians 5 has something to say to us even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century if we can let go of focusing only on the social structure of the time.

Being subject to one another is not “giving up” and becoming some kind of doormat. Simply put, this “submit thing” is regard for the other. It is the basis of relationships as couples, as friends, as adult children and parents with as much mutual awareness and regard for one another as possible.

We won’t find an ethic on marital or intimate relationships all worked out for us in the Bible, but we will find some gems that guide us along the way.

As we read this passage in Ephesians, we recognize that there is no such thing as pure Christianity untouched by human culture. We all live in our historical, geographical moment. The household arrangements that work for us in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States are not what works at other points in history or in other cultures. But our Christian faith and Biblical witness are alive in the midst of this moment in history. Scripture provides crumbs along the way that can keep us from getting too culturally bound.

“Being subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.” That may not be the exact way I might want to phrase what is “radical mutuality,” but this idea of reverence for the other? That speaks to me—and to you—and to all our relationships of love—mutuality and reverence first shown to us in Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.