

Ephesians 5:22-6:9
(Genesis 1:26-28; Matthew 19:3-15)
“Wisdom in Life’s Key Relationships”

Introduction

We return this morning to our study of Ephesians after a month-and-a-half hiatus. When we last studied this letter, Paul was describing a life of wisdom, lived according to God’s will in the Spirit’s strength. He ended those particular verses with the words, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Those words serve as a subject title for the verses that follow, the verses that we will be looking at this morning. If we fail to recognize the connection between the call to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” we set our selves up for misunderstanding.

Furthermore, if we fail to understand the historic and cultural context of this passage, we will also sadly misunderstand how to interpret these verses. I confess to feeling a great sadness at too many weddings where I have heard these verses used with no sensitivity whatever to their context and so with well-intentioned, sincere, but – in my opinion – utterly mistaken advice given to bride and groom. Young men and women who desire to be godly husbands and wives, but who misunderstand Paul’s context, will often draw the opposite lessons from the ones that Paul intends.

When I was a student of literature and philosophy, and, later, of theology, my teachers frequently reminded us of the essential interpretive rule, “text without context is pretext.” The New Testament scholar, Don Carson, has taken that one step further by saying, “text without context is pretext, leading to a proof text.” A proof text is a text that someone cites in order to try to prove one’s view. But, if you have no clue what is the context from which a text has been written or advice has been given, you will likely misunderstand, misinterpret and misapply it.

Here we have Paul illustrating what wisdom looks like in the three key relational areas of life: marriage, family and work. He links wisdom to relational submission, a startlingly counter-cultural notion in any age. Sadly, too many people read this as if the context of Paul and his readers were 21st century America. Thus they read and understand, and then try to apply his words, in a way that often runs counter to what he is actually saying, when one hears him in his cultural context – or one might say “contexts,” because Paul was both a Jewish Rabbi and a Roman citizen.

Perhaps it will come through clearer for us if we begin with the relationship that most obviously cuts against our cultural grain and proves that Paul is addressing a very different world than the one in which you and I live and move and have our being. So let’s take these in reverse order, and by the time we come to marriage, the one that is most often misunderstood and misapplied, hopefully we will have a better sense of how to understand these three illustrations.

Body

1. **Work: wisdom for employers and employees (6:5-9).**

A word to slaves: This is jarring to our ears. “Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling” (6:5). Can you imagine anyone in our culture telling workers that they are to obey their boss with fear and trembling, as if their boss were Christ himself? Why would Paul call for such a servile attitude? Because he lived in a world where slavery was common and accepted and expected. If you were to have spoken in that day of freedom and justice for all people, the greatest thinkers of the ancient world would have laughed at you. Plato and Aristotle thought that a privileged few were worthy to rule, that others were to serve and that slaves were property.

Why doesn't Paul challenge such thinking? Why doesn't the Bible condemn slavery? Simply because the Bible was written within a world that knew nothing but slavery: slavery was a fact of life and it did not occur to anyone to question it. It was a given in a world marked by sin and oppression and suffering. So Paul reminds slaves who have now been spiritually set free in Christ that they must still live as slaves, showing the fear and trembling that masters expected of those who were their property. But Paul tells them to do it for Christ, to bring honor to his name, to be the best slaves they can be for the reputation of Christ.

It was, in fact the gospel working its way like leaven in a loaf, changing the view of the worth and value of every human being, that would finally issue in the world we know today. Those who believe in freedom but deny the gospel do not realize that they are living off of the values that transformed western culture precisely through the development of a biblical world and life view.

A word to masters: Note that Paul begins addressing each of these three key areas of relationship by first addressing the one who was completely powerless in his culture: the slave, the child, the wife. Only after calming down his readers and assuring them that there was nothing culturally revolutionary about his message, only then would he turn to the people in power – the masters, the parents, the husbands – and call them to a mutual submission that was, in fact, extraordinarily counter-cultural.

So, here, he turns to masters and says, just as I reminded your slaves that they are actually slaves of Christ and must render their service to him, the same is true for you. Be careful how you treat them, “and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him” (6:9). In other words, you may be impressed with the social structures and proud of your power, but your Master is unimpressed and is watching carefully how you treat you slaves,

who are actually not yours but his, just as you are his and no different from them.

How much more clearly should bosses in our culture who claim the name of Christ realize that God is unimpressed with human power and has displayed his power through self-sacrificial love? If we dare to call ourselves by his Son's name, it should make all the difference in the way we understand and exercise leadership. Jesus said,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20: 25-28).

2. Family: wisdom for parents and children (6:1-4).

A word to children: Paul's word to children was little different than his word to slaves, because children were as powerless as slaves and were also the property, not of their mothers, but of their fathers. The Roman law of *patria potestas* established the father as potentate of his children, owning everything that was theirs and having the right to punish or even kill a child who displeased him. His rule was absolute.

So Paul, once again, confirms the status quo, acknowledging the status of children, but calling upon the child, as he did upon the slave, to be encouraged in fulfilling the role assigned by life, in this case, that of child within a family. He encourages children by reminding them that it is right for them to obey their parents and that the first commandment with a promise is given to those who honor their parents.

Once again, Paul's words would please those in power, namely, parents and especially fathers. He is not subverting the established order, but is encouraging children to be obedient and to show honor to their parents. Thus it has ever been for the right and peaceful ordering of any society, children should first lean obedience and respect in the home.

A word to fathers: But then Paul turns and, just as in the case of masters, he addresses the person in power with a warning not to abuse that power. Note that, while he calls upon children to obey and honor both father and mother, he acknowledges the reality of *patria potestas* by only addressing the fathers: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (6:4).

If you see your child as your property, what difference does it make how your property feels about the way you treat it? But as Paul has already written in this letter, “every family in heaven and on earth is named” from our heavenly Father (3:14-15). Human fathers are to seek to understand fatherhood by studying the self-sacrificial love of our heavenly Father, by noting how graciously he runs to meet and lavish forgiveness upon prodigals who return to him, and how wise is his discipline and instruction. If our heavenly Father so loves, forgives and nurtures us, how much should we who have known such grace show grace to our children, even in our discipline and instruction.

3. **Marriage: wisdom for husbands and wives (5:22-33).**

A word to wives: In Roman law, *manus* was the power of husband over wife, corresponding to his *patria potestas* rule over his children. Just as he had the right of life and death over his children, so the Roman husband had all power and authority, even of life and death, over his wife. So now we should see that Paul’s point is not to teach unique submission on the part of Christian wives. He is calling all Christians, slave and master, parent and child, husband and wife, to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). But he simply in each of these three spheres of relationship first addresses the powerless party so as to assure those in power that he is not inciting a cultural revolution.

So he writes, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord” (5:22). There was nothing new in wives submitting to their husbands. That’s what every Greek and Roman and Jewish girl was taught all through her childhood. She knew, as surely as a slave knew, that she had not been born to freedom and would always be the property of a man, first her father and later, if she married, her husband.

But what is new is the way that Paul here, just as in addressing children and slaves, gives a theological meaning and value to submission, so that it is not simply in order to stay out of trouble or to please a man (see, for example, 6:6-7). Rather it is an invitation to incarnate within marriage the role of the church, the bride of Christ, and to live in the kind of relationship with one’s husband that Christ desires from his church. Do you see how, in a world where women were considered of no value except for bearing children, Paul is encouraging woman to realize their value in Christ?

A word to husbands: But it is when he turns to address husbands that Paul’s program is clearest. If the call to wives sounds strange to our modern ears, Paul’s words to husbands would have sounded astonishing and counter-cultural to his ancient readers.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her

with the washing of water with the word ... husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself ... "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (5:25-33).

There is nothing comparable to this in first century literature. Women were not valued. Here is the great Roman orator, Cato, on the rights of women:

Our fathers have willed that women should be in the power of their fathers, of their brothers, of their husbands. Remember all the laws by which our fathers have bound down the liberty of women, by which they have bent them to the power of men. As soon as they are our equals, they become our superiors.

Plato in his *Symposium* quoted Socrates as saying, "Woman are for bearing children, but boys are for pleasure." Even within Israel, a man could divorce his wife for any reason while a woman could not divorce her husband for any reason. An Israelite man could take several wives and could sleep with any woman he wanted provided she was not betrothed or married to another man. A woman who behaved in that way was to be stoned to death.

Into such a world Paul called upon Christian husbands to love their wives with the same self-sacrificial love with which "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25) so that she might become the beautiful, unblemished bride that the Lord desires. He completely theologizes marriage as the flesh and blood picture of the relationship between Christ and his people. Marriage is, thus, something holy, a place where we learn to give ourselves up in love to one another, to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Headship is service, authority and power are poured out and given up for the sake of the other.

Conclusion

Do you see that Paul's advice, in its historical context, is not oppressive but liberating, not a call to the enslavement of workers, children and wives, but a call to those in power to give themselves up in love and realize that, to God, we are all equal in worth and value, and we will answer to him for how we fulfill our roles? Do you see how culturally conditioned Paul's words were and how differently he would have written these same truths to a culture like ours, where slavery is abolished thank God, where children are protected by law thank God, and where women have the same freedom as men thank God? Let's not seek to return to an age of oppression and inequality from which the gospel has set us free. Let's walk through the door into the freedom and equality that are ours in Christ Jesus.

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