

Submitting to One Another

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[0 : 00] I must say this is hardly a popular passage of our current favourite passages of the Bible. Very few brides want to submit, let alone obey, when they take their marriage vows these days.

And for many people I guess submission conjures up notions of oppression or male chauvinism. For many people they want to dismiss this passage and put it to the side and say, well St Paul is merely reflecting the patriarchal culture of his day.

We are much more liberated and sophisticated and enlightened in our modern times. Equality and identity or interchangeability rather than hierarchy are what modern people think about marriage and marriage roles.

I guess the human rights movement of recent decades has also encouraged and fuelled feelings of anti-authority attitudes. So that people want to be independent and free and equal rather than submitting to anybody else.

So what do we do with a passage like this that encourages wives to submit? We could just put it to the side and say that it is a reflection of a culture of 2,000 years ago and is no longer relevant at all.

[1 : 18] Or alternatively we could try and water down the passage to change what it means obviously and say, well really this bit really means something else. Or maybe we should take it as it is and see it as something that perhaps jars against our modern culture and yet may yet be the word of God for us.

Let's keep those options in mind as we look at this passage and seek to apply it to us. Before we deal with wives and husbands specifically, it's important to bear in mind the context of this passage.

Firstly, it's addressed to Christian people. People who know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who receive forgiveness through his death. People who are part of a church as Christian people and are involved in the fellowship of God's people.

It's in that context that Paul writes these words. Secondly, it's in the context within this letter of exhorting Christians to live a worthy life.

A life worthy of the calling to which they've been lived at the beginning of chapter 4. To live a life of unity in Christian fellowship. As Paul has spelled out the meaning of unity in chapters 2 and 3 and then applied it and exhorted Christians to follow it in chapter 4.

[2 : 38] It's in the context of encouraging Christians not to live like the pagans and non-Christians around about, but to live distinctive lives as Christians within Christian fellowship.

It's also in the context of imitating Jesus Christ himself. So chapter 5 began by exhorting the Christians to be imitators of God as beloved children and live in love as Christ has loved you.

It's also in the context of wise living. Not being foolish people, but being wise people and using time well, as chapter 5 verses 15 and onwards say.

The third mark of the context of this passage is that it's in the context of being filled with the Holy Spirit of God. In verse 18 in the paragraph preceding, Paul has said, Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

A passage we looked at last week. And I noted then that there are four consequences of being filled with the Spirit. One is in verse 19, Singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to each other.

[3 : 48] The second was singing and making melody to the Lord. The third was giving thanks to God at all times and for everything. And the fourth, like those other three are participle depending upon being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The fourth mark of being filled with the Spirit is submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. In verse 21. The fourth note of context for the statements to wives and husbands in particular is verse 21 itself.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. That's addressed to the church, to a body exhorted to be filled with the Spirit.

And to each and every person within that church, each and every Christian person, be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. So to each one of us here today that applies to us as Christian people as part of Christ's church.

We are to be subject to each other out of reverence for Christ. That is young to old and old to young, male to female, female to male, ordained to lay and lay to ordained, those in leadership, those not in leadership.

[5 : 03] All of us in every relationship within the church, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. What follows then about wives and husbands are specific examples of what are general exhortations.

So all of us are to submit to each other, in a general sense at least, but in a specific way wives are to submit to their husbands. Likewise, earlier in this chapter, Paul has exhorted all Christians to love one another as Christ has loved you, and now he will say in verse 25 and following to, specifically to husbands, love your wives.

So the general exhortation to all Christians is to love, but specifically now husbands are to love their wives. The general exhortation to all Christians is to submit to each other, now the specific exhortation to wives is for them to submit to their husbands.

Again, remember that this is a Christian context, where every Christian is to exhibit submission and love. That's my way of context or introduction, if you like, to the specific comments to the wives and to the husbands.

Firstly then, the wives. If I were in Glen Waverley, according to a friend of mine who's the associate minister there, I would now ask all you men and those who aren't wives to go and have a cup of coffee at the back.

[6 : 36] That's what he did recently, apparently, when he preached this passage. I think that would be a bit lacking in decorum for Doncaster, and maybe avant-garde Glen Waverley can get away with it, but I'm not so sure that we could.

But remember that these words are addressed to those of you who are wives. So, John, this is the time to read the Melbourne Anglican and those other men here. Okay, I'll get back to you in a few minutes.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. Notice that actually it's to your husbands, not to all men, but wives, be subject to your husbands, to your own husbands.

Not women, be subject to men. Wives, be subject to your own husbands as you are to the Lord. And the reason that is given in the verses that follow, for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the saviour.

Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be in everything to their husbands. It's a little, if you remember back to childhood, you might have done those IQ tests at school to determine what your IQ is.

[7 : 50] And they would give you two relationships or a variety of relationships. As Christ is to the church, so is something to something. And you would have to pick the right things to reflect that.

And here the IQ test, if you like, is as Christ is to the church, so the husband is to the wife. So the wife's attitude to the husband should be like the church's attitude to Christ.

Christ. And Paul is saying to the wife that Christ is the head of the church, and the analogy is the husband is the head of the wife. Now I guess the idea of headship of a husband is not always popular in our society and even in Christian circles.

Some try to explain it as meaning the source or the origin, and the word may have sometimes that connotation. But the basic sense of the word is the idea of head over or authority.

And that is the way Paul has used the word in this letter as well. So back in chapter 1 he talked about Christ and the church, and in his prayer he prayed and mentioned that God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made Christ the head over all things for the church.

[9 : 07] And the sense there is clearly a sense of authority. And the same in chapter 4 as well. And that seems to be the sense that's most likely and most probable here. That Christ is the head over the church with a sense of authority, and the same, that analogy then applies to the husband and the wife.

That the husband is the head with a sense of authority over the wife. Notice that Paul exhorts the wives to submit to the husbands, not in spiritual matters, but in verse 24, in everything, without limit, a fairly demanding exercise.

Notice that Paul is encouraging or exhorting the wives to offer a willing and free submission to their husbands.

He never asks the husbands to impose submission, but he exhorts the wives to freely submit to their husbands. Notice also that it's only in the paragraph to wives that Paul calls the husband the head.

So if I'd asked all you men to leave, you wouldn't know that you were the head, according to this passage. It's only to the wives that Paul talks of the husband in terms of headship.

[10 : 26] Well, is this just a cultural thing or not? Is this really now irrelevant in our modern times? Scholars acknowledge that Paul does not purely reflect the culture of his day.

Verse 21, when he encourages mutual submission from each and every member of the Christian body, that's not a cultural thing. That actually goes against the grain of Paul's culture.

When Paul exhorts the wives to be subject to their own husbands, possibly there is a sense of restriction that they are not subject to other people's husbands and they're not subject to men generally, but to their own husbands they are.

So maybe there Paul is actually restricting the cultural practices of his day and again cutting against them. Notice also that the reasons Paul gives for wives to submit are not cultural reasons.

He's not saying, because this is the order of your culture then you should do as your culture says. He's not saying that because in your society the men are the boss then make sure, Christian wives, that you acknowledge your husband to be the boss.

[11 : 30] He's not saying that at all. He's saying wives submit to your husbands because of theological reasons, because of the nature of who Christ is and his relationship to the church.

Notice also that Paul is not forcing submission from the wives, but he's exhorting them to offer a free and willing submission to their husbands. Something that is in fact an expression of freedom and liberty rather than imposition.

So then, to you wives who are here, when did you last submit to your husband as to Christ? When did you last consider your wives, or your husbands, in the same sort of terms as you consider Jesus Christ?

For as we'll note at the last verse, the wife should, in our translation, say respect, but literally it's the word fear, much stronger than respect. It's the same word that's used in verse 21 when it's translated reverence.

Again, perhaps a bit weak. Be subject to one another out of fear for Christ. And the end of the passage says, and a wife should fear her husband. So the same attitude from a wife should be given to the husband as they give to Christ.

[12 : 46] Very striking, I think. Fear Christ, you wives. Fear your husbands also. So don't be sucked in by the spirit of our age.

Be brave and willingly submit to your husbands. Be strong and yield to your husband as your head. Be bold and regard your husband as you regard Christ.

Well, the clash with ancient culture is more evident, I think, in the paragraph that follows. If we were in Glen Waverley, I'd be ushering in the men and sending you women out now to do the dishes.

No, I mean to have a cup of tea. Paul does not say when he addresses the husbands in verse 25 onwards, husbands, because you're the head, rule or dominate.

He doesn't say to oppress. He doesn't say to boss around or exercise authority. He doesn't say be the head, but he says love. Love. Very striking.

[13 : 48] Almost absent in the ancient world. Husbands love, especially using the word for love that's used here. Three times in this passage, Paul says to husbands, love your wives.

Verse 25 and then in 28 in the middle and then at the very last verse of the chapter as well. Again, remember that this comes out of the general context where all Christians are to love all other Christians.

But in a special way, husbands are to love their wives. And the model of love is not some sort of romantic, mushy feeling inside. Certainly not a sort of erotic love, but a sacrificial, self-giving love demonstrated pre-eminently by Jesus' death on the cross.

In the way that Jesus died and gave up his life for the church, that is to be the love that a husband loves his wife with. And that is demanding love indeed.

That's not patriarchal domination. That is a self-giving, sacrificial, other-centred, selfless love. Love that is aimed at the wife's benefit and good.

[14 : 57] For Christ died for our good. And the analogy is extended in this passage. So too is the husband to live and die for the good of his wife.

Paul goes on to show ways in which Christ served the good of the church in his death. In verse 26, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water, probably a reference to baptism, by the word, a reference to the preaching of the gospel.

In John's gospel, Jesus says in his prayer in chapter 17, for the disciples and for the world, Father, sanctify them by your truth. The word is truth. And that's the same idea here, that we are cleansed by God's word.

The purpose of Christ's death, Paul goes on to say in verse 27, was that Christ may present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind.

Picture here, perhaps, of a bride getting ready for a wedding. The analogy breaks down, because here Christ the bridegroom is preparing the bride, which of course wouldn't happen. But the idea is that he is making the bride beautiful and perfect.

[16 : 08] Not of course physically, but morally and spiritually. And that is why he died for us, for the church. And Paul goes on to say, the end of verse 27, yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

And if you can remember back to my very first Sunday here, my very first sermon when we began this letter, before the foundation of the world, God chose us in Christ to be holy and without blemish.

Same two words. And now we find that the way in which we become holy and without blemish is through Jesus' death for us on the cross. That is Christ's work for the church.

That's what Christ died for, for the good and benefit of the church. Maybe there are times when you're frustrated with the church today. And I think I share that at times.

But we must be careful not to judge God by the standards of the church. For the church is like a bride beginning to get ready for the wedding. Not yet beautiful. Not yet perfect.

[17 : 13] Not yet holy. Not yet without blemish and spot. One day the church will be perfect. And ultimately that is Christ's work. But not yet. He's still working on us.

So don't get too frustrated with the church. It's not perfect. It won't be perfect until the end. Bear with it. Because Christ is working on us. And working on the church. But one day it will be perfect.

Like a bride ready for her husband. One day Holy Trinity Doncaster will be perfect. As a bride awaiting its husband Christ. Christ. And that model of what Christ does for the church is to be the model for you husbands about how you treat your wives.

Paul uses another reason for why husbands should love their wives. They should love their wives as their own bodies. Paul regards husband and wife as one flesh.

Something that the Old Testament had advocated. And so he quotes Genesis 2 in verse 31. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. And the point of the quote is the last bit.

[18 : 22] And the two will become one flesh. So there's a sense in which a husband can regard his wife as his own body. And therefore treat it as his own body.

And nourish it and tenderly care for it as his own body. And Paul then uses that picture of the one body between husband and wife. And shows that the same applies for Christ and the church.

For of course the church is often described by Paul as the body of Christ. So when Christ died to love the church he does so in a sense for his own body. And so the same must apply for husbands.

Treat your wives love your wives as your own body. Paul says nobody disregards their body. They look after it. They feed it. They nourish it.

They clothe it. In the same way husbands you should regard your wives and care for them nourish them and cherish them. So for you husbands when did you last love your wives as Christ loved the church?

[19 : 25] When did you last give up yourself for your wife in some costly and sacrificial way? When did you last do something costly in time or money or energy for the sake and the good and the benefit of your wife?

Don't fall for the cultural pressure that is on men in our society to be macho and uncaring and selfish brutes basically. So often the Australian male I think sadly is either a strong muscular brute or is as weak as dishwater.

Christian men and Christian husbands have a duty to model good husbandship husbandry whatever the noun is. Not strong and uncaring and not weak as dishwater but strong and loving.

I remember once interviewing a couple who wanted to get married. He'd been married twice before she once I think and he was a typical Aussie bloke she was pregnant with his child and I asked him what do you do what do you do for her?

What do you do that pleases her? I can't remember their names now and his comment was well everything I do she likes to do as well and I thought what a selfish person I mean that's why I'd ask the question because the things he'd said seem so selfish sadly I think many Australian men are a bit like that the models we have in our society are not very good I think we men and especially you husbands have to be strong but love your wives as Christ loved the church for that is real strength be brave and give yourself up for your wife be courageous and tenderly care for her Paul finishes with a summary in verse 33 each of you however should love his wife as himself and a wife should respect literally fear her husband in this passage is a very high view of marriage and of Christian marriage it is not unimportant it is not trivial it is not something to be taken lightly but rather is of the utmost importance within Christian fellowship within Christian relationships that is why we have just begun to reintroduce marriage seminars for those who are preparing for marriage as some of you

[22 : 08] I know here today are that is why I think in the future it will be good to encourage you who are married whether recently or not to be involved in marriage refreshment courses and marriage enrichment courses because marriage is so important and the Bible has such a high view of the importance of Christian marriage but this passage also has limits it doesn't answer the question about the problems it doesn't address the issue of what happens when mutual submission breaks down what happens when the wife is rebellious and not submissive what happens when the husband is unloving and authoritarian what happens if the partner is not a Christian this passage at least doesn't give the answers to those questions but also notice that there are no limits placed on the submission and love that is demanded it doesn't say wives submit to your husbands while he loves you and it doesn't say husbands love your wives as long as she is submissive there is no condition placed on the submission and love rather wives submit husbands love no condition is placed on them very demanding indeed of wives and of husbands notice also by way of conclusion that this is

Christ centred this is not just good psychology this is theological marriage Jesus is at the centre of everything that's going on here he is at the centre of the submission of wives he is at the centre of the love of the husbands he is at the centre of the headship of the husbands he is at the centre of the submission of each Christian to every other Christian Jesus is the model and the motivation for all of that in Christian relationships generally but in marriage in particular this passage also is not anti-women as some think indeed more attention is given to the husbands than to the wives twice as much attention is given to the husbands as to the wives if I'd actually asked you to leave for the appropriate bits of the sermon so that only those to whom this was addressed were here you wives would be out there drinking more tea than the men would have had time to because there is much more that is given to the husbands here than to the wives yes the wives are encouraged to offer free and willing submission but of course it's submission to a lover not to an ogre what we have in this passage is a

Christian marriage is centred on Jesus Christ he is to be the centre of every Christian marriage and both husbands and wives will only understand their roles in marriage and be encouraged in their relationships in marriage when they fully appreciate the death of Jesus Christ and his love for his church which is his body which is us let's pray our father we thank you indeed for your son who died for us who loved us so much that he gave his very life for us so for us who are husbands we pray that you'll help us to love like that and for those of us who are wives we pray that you'll help wives to honour and respect and fear their husbands as they fear Christ we pray father that at the centre of all our relationships and especially our marriages will be