

## Submit to One Another, Part 1

### “All of You”

Ephesians 5:21

The doctor pulled the wife aside and began to explain her husband’s condition. “He’s suffering from a very severe disease, combined with horrible stress. He could die. Each morning, fix him a healthy breakfast. Be pleasant, and make sure he is in a good mood. Make him a special dinner every night. DO NOT burden him with chores or your problems. It will only make his stress worse. Do everything you can to shelter him from any frustration or inconvenience. If you can keep this up for about ten months to a year, there’s a chance he could recover completely.”

On the way home, the husband asked his wife, “What did the doctor say?”

She replied, “He said you’re going to die.”

It’s not easy or even natural to completely deny oneself for the sake of someone else. Still, Paul tells us:

<sup>21</sup>Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Once more, indulge me as I review God’s eternal purpose in sending Jesus to a fallen creation:

<sup>9</sup>And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup>to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. – Ephesians 1:9, 10

Human sin introduced chaos into Eden. Every dimension of creation was damaged. One particularly significant and adverse affect of the Fall was that our perfect social potential was flawed. Sinners cannot live rightly with God or with each other. Adam walked in the garden as with a friend. Now, man gropes after God in uncertainty. God’s purpose in Jesus is to restore all that sin had torn apart.

In Jesus, the Father made Himself fully known to the human race. Christ died for our sin and defeated it when He destroyed its greatest symptom, physical death. We who have come to Jesus in faith have been restored to our Creator. As we yield our lives to Christ, He now works to restore our relationships to one another. The most severe social barrier in the world in that day was the racial and religious animosity between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had been chosen by God as the instrument for working out His will for the world. In their pride, they developed disdain for all other races. Now, according to Ephesians, Jews and Gentiles in Christ have been declared “one new man” in Christ.

Now, Paul applies this same restorative power of God in Christ to the most conspicuous relationships of our lives; our marriages, our nuclear families and our workplaces. Christ is also working to restore believers to one another in these prominent human relationships. Unity among God’s people is one of the most important themes in the Bible because it showcases His expressed will for His kingdom. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we allow disunity to work against God’s purposes – not only in the church, but in any institution where Christian people are in a relationship with one another.

When Paul wrote, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” he was addressing the whole household of faith with a mutual command. In weeks to come, I will address how specific individuals were to express this mutual submission. There was a precise way that Christian wives were to express submission to their husbands and there was a precise way that Christian husbands were to express submission to their wives. The same was true of the mutual responsibility of submission shared by children and fathers as well as by slaves and masters. For now, we will consider this basic injunction from which all those specific expressions emerge; mutual submission required of every believer.

# **I. The Necessity of Human Relationships**

## **A. Man Is, by Nature, a Social Creature**

By design, we are in a relationship with the rest of the human race. People need people. This is not an admission of weakness, but a simple facing of reality. We need people for security, for the provision of life's essentials and for various emotional and spiritual reasons. In fact, our pursuit of independence can be one of the most counter-productive things that we do. Psychotherapist James Hillman observes:

“I can watch 34 channels of TV; I can get on the fax and communicate with people anywhere; I can be everywhere at once; I can fly across the country. I've got call waiting, so I can take two calls at once. I live everywhere and nowhere. But I don't know who lives next door to me. Who's in the next flat? Who's in 14-B?”

We were not designed to live that way. Various honorable institutions came into existence to respond to the reality that we do not prosper on our own. These institutions gave order to our essential human relationships. Basic physical and emotional needs were met. Marriage was honorable for God Himself established it. The family was honorable. Government was honorable. As difficult as it is for moderns to appreciate, even slavery was potentially honorable, for basic human needs were met. In particularly caring homes, slaves might be treated as children. In fact, that is the rub for all social institutions. They are only as humane as the principles involved. Where people were caring, such institutions functioned well, even slavery. Where people were driven by selfish pride, each system was destined to deteriorate.

## **B. Sin and Pride Rendered Us Selfish Social Creatures**

The fact that we are free in Christ does not alter the fact that we are inter-dependant on one another. Our freedom is from our sinful selves, not from people. That means our freedom is from the tendency to look out for ourselves at the expense of others. We are free to “serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). We were never free to do that before, because the fear born of self-promotion and self-preservation got in the way. It's hard to put others first when you're looking out for number one.

When Satan tempted Eve, he attacked her pride. God had given Adam and Eve the run of Eden with one exception; they could not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the center of the garden. They would die if they disobeyed. Satan told Eve that God did not mean what He said. He told her that she could be as smart as God, and, she “bit.” They learned that God does mean what He says.

The pair's sin brought God's “curse” upon the creation. In wording that curse, God made this strange comment to Eve: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). That word “desire” is not a noble word. It refers to a desire to possess or control. Because sin had infected Adam and Eve, self-promotion infected their relationship. Eve would desire to control Adam in spite of Adam's God-given authority. Adam would abuse his God-given authority by “pulling rank” on Eve like a tyrant. And boys and girls, that's when the battle of the sexes really began. In fact, the first marital spat in history was over whether Adam or Eve would “wear the pants” in the family.

God hates our pride because it breaks down essential social institutions like marriage and the family. Parents are either so busy being “boss” that they discipline unrealistically, or they are so worried about being a “buddy” that they discipline inadequately. Masters decided they were above providing adequate care for their slaves. Slaves became lazy and rebellious. Pride still breaks down businesses. It cripples governments. Any institution that might otherwise exist to accomplish something worthwhile, or to minister to basic human needs, is damaged when human pride moves to the fore. Sadly, even the church of Jesus Christ is knocked off her heavenly course when pride takes control.

The words of W. G. Blaike, a contributor to the *Pulpit Commentary*, are a century old, but I have not read anyone who hits the nail on the head any better: “Pride leads us to demand rigorously from others what we fancy they owe us; humility, to give to others what Christ teaches that we owe to them.”

## **II. The Necessity of Mutual Submission in these Human Relationships**

### **A. Mutual Submission Restores Order to the Chaos of Human Relationships**

Two friends were hiking when they saw in the distance a large grizzly bear that also saw them and decided that they looked like a good snack. They started running, but suddenly one of them stopped. The other said, “What are you stopping for? There’s a grizzly bear coming at us!” The first runner replied, “I am tying my shoe so I can run faster.” The other scoffed, saying, “We need to get to the cabin now. You can’t outrun that grizzly?” The friend replied, “I don’t have to outrun that grizzly, I only have to outrun you.” Every man for himself is a hard habit to break.

The word for “submit,” was a military term meaning “to arrange under.” The term revolved around concepts of “rank and order,” not “authority and subservience.” Authority factors into the military, but it is not the central theme. There are “big picture issues” that are more central – things like “military mission” and “national security.” When authority becomes a more central issue in the military than those things, we find revolution and military coups. We also find a nation in deep peril because military purpose and national security become back-burner items in the hierarchy of important concerns.

The idea of submission is not based on the inherent quality of a person to whom submission is due. That would make for an ideal world, but such submission would not tax us very much. Submission, typically, is to a position. In other words, wives are not to submit only to perfect husbands, and husbands are not to love as themselves only perfect wives. If that were the case, how fast do you think order would break down even in the church? Submission is due to less than perfect fathers, less than perfect bosses, less than perfect government officials and less than perfect church leaders.

God is a God of order and as such He ordains structures conducive to order. Authority figures that abuse and exploit their God-given authority destroy the big pictures within God’s Kingdom. Marriages suffer when men are oppressive. Families suffer when fathers are overbearing. Productivity suffers when slave-owners then, as well as bosses today, are blinded by raw power and indifference to those under them. At the same time, those called to live under authority, who will not follow anything less than perfect leaders, are acting rebelliously and they too do violence to the kingdom of God.

### **B. Mutual Submission Restores Service in Love to our Necessary Human Relationships**

When believers “submit to one another,” normalcy is re-introduced into basic, human relationships and interdependencies. Basic needs are met in legitimate ways. No one has to be “high-handed” about it. No one gets “steam-rolled” in the process. This is how the church showcases the unity of the Spirit to the world. Mutually submissive people assume their God-given roles for the sake of the “big picture,” of kingdom beauty. Christian, do not dismiss this as idealistic, for Paul commanded it:

<sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! – Philippians 2:3-8

Verses 5-8 are called a Christology or a “word about Christ,” but they are woven onto a straightforward instruction to believers to be humble and to put the good of others above their own interest. “Have the same attitude as Christ,” Paul said. Jesus told His disciples, “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me.” Here, Paul notes that Jesus was God in His very nature. Unquestionably, we are dealing with profound power and authority. But do you see how Jesus threw His weight around? He died for us. He was God in the flesh, but He laid aside those privileges to salvage condemned sinners. God became the servant of men. Jesus “submitted” Himself to men to better them in God’s eyes.

That’s the attitude of Jesus which calls each of us to posture ourselves as servants to one another. Mutual submission renders Christian relationships as God envisions they should be. Mutual submission is not worked out on a contingency; “If he will, I will.” Our only contribution to mutual submission is to freely submit ourselves for the common good, trusting it will prove to be contagious. Coercion is of little value, for any submission not from the heart falls flat when examined against the attitude of Jesus.

### **C. A Working Definition of Submission**

Submission in any relationship is not an abandonment or a reversal of God-assigned roles. That never works out very well. Twenty-plus years ago, Linda and Kelli were still in the hospital when I began popping-off about having another child. Linda told me categorically that I was having the next one. I’m sure she meant it at the time, but childbearing proved to be one role that was not to be exchanged.

Submission in any relationship is not an abandoning or a reversal of God-assigned roles. It is the realization that we are not in any relationship (marriage, family, vocation, church, *etc.*) for our personal benefit only, but also for the sake of the ones with whom we share that relationship. In Christian relationships, submission is assuming a God-given position for the purpose of enhancing one’s own development as well as the development of another person’s God-given role. In other words, a submissive husband builds up a godly wife. A submissive wife builds up godly husband. A submissive child makes the task of being a godly parent easier and *vice versa*. Servant-hearted elders build better flocks, and submissive church flocks build better elders. Pride at any point damages God’s ideal.

## **III. The Necessity of Reverence for Christ to this Mutual Submission**

### **A. True Submission Is Born of Reverence for Christ**

Elsewhere in the New Testament, this word for “reverence” is translated “fear” and “reverent fear.” This is not fear in the sense of terror so much as it is a “holy apprehension” in the presence of One Who is awesome. It is the respect that causes us to want to keep our fleshly tendencies out of the presence of a holy Father. It is the caution that tends to make us not want to offend Someone that we love.

Without Christ, pride drives every man, woman and child. We revere Christ because, though He was one with God, He died for us. Heaven's King died so that sinners might live. We stand in a relationship with God the Father because of Jesus' humble submission and concern for Heaven's big picture. Now, we are to work at our relationships with others for whom Christ died. We are to lay down our lives for them. We are to share whatever is needed. We are to put their needs ahead of our own.

We can only do these things as we hold Christ in great awe, recoiling from all thoughts of offending Him by our presumption or rebellion against authority. We can only do these things out of a sense of duty to Christ's will. We can only act this way when we look at wife, husband, parent, child, boss, employee – or any other “one another” character in our lives – and recognize that Christ died for them just as He died for us. We submit to one another out of reverence for Christ because it is the only way that we can submit to one another. It certainly does not come to us as second nature.

## **B. The Fear of Christ Restores Our Sense of the “Big Pictures” in Life**

In any human relationship, impasses of disagreement will occur. In such moments, God has already established chains of command. One party is ultimately accountable to God for leading and the other is not. Those called by God to lead must never cease to see themselves as servants and they must never see their authority as being so about them that they lose sight of the big pictures in the Kingdom of God. That said, leaders still have to make decisions. Therefore, it is essential that those not called to lead learn to lovingly and humbly embrace direction. Otherwise, the church becomes a place of disorder that cannot reflect a God of order. Whenever “push comes to shove,” Kingdom beauty has already been marred.

Persons driven by pride will always make poor husbands, inferior wives, overbearing parents, rebellious children, harsh masters, lazy slaves, bad leaders, rotten followers – crummy Christians. The person who is aware that he will one day stand personally accountable before God will strive for the standard Christ set and, in the process, create a greater blessing in the home, the workplace and the church.

Wielding authority may or may not ever be an issue in your life. We are all called to submissive servanthood. Only reverence for Christ can insure that dignity is extended to all people. When we come to Christ and revere Him, we see others through His eyes. He died for others as surely as He died for us. Only Jesus Christ can teach us how to live and only He can empower us to live together.

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