

Ephesians 5:18-6:9
Leaders and Their Followers

Eph 5:18-33 (ESV) 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. 9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

So I come to the part of the letter to the Ephesians I have been dreading. The battle lines of our culture are drawn here. Churches stand on all sides of the issues of marriage, gender and the equality of our fellow humans. Our Churches are divided and at war within, as we battle the culture that seems to want to do away with all religion once and for all. In many ways the Church mimics the culture by the way we demand our freedom and our right to do as we please, while at the same time we look down on the people who are demanding the very same thing. Who will win? How can anyone win?

The answer we Christians give, of course, is that Jesus will win. Paul would go further and say that Jesus has already won! Then why does the battle rage on? Because we live in a fallen world, but even the statement "*fallen world*" only makes sense if we understand the original world found in the book of Genesis. Paul makes his

central appeal in this section from Genesis where the Lord God created man and woman and left it up to them to become what He wanted them, and us, to be. They were a “becoming people.” “*Be fruitful and multiply,*” He told them. He gave them the freedom to *pro*-create in the process that He had begun. He blessed them and walked with them because He loved them as He had loved Himself—the love between Father-Son-Holy Spirit that existed from all eternity. And it all went wrong.

As I have said before, Paul loves metaphors. So does Jesus and so does His Father. One of the greatest metaphors in the Torah is the marriage metaphor. Israel is the wife of God, and as it turns out she is a most unfaithful wife and God must keep forgiving her over and over again. Paul tells us the metaphor continues: The Church is the wife of Christ. The point in both testaments is that the people of God, as the wife of God, must submit to Him and be loyal to Him in order to reflect the kind of love God intended in the original creation of man. So Paul says, “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church...*”(5:22-23). Paul can tell us this because inside the Church we are in a new world with Christ as our resurrected Husband. He lives and we, too, have been made alive. But how does this whole submission idea strike those of us who are still bound to our former lives and our own ideas? I like Rebecca McLaughlin’s honest reaction to this passage when she confronted it as a new Christian. She called it *The Offense of the Marriage Metaphor*:

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord...”? You have got to be kidding me. I had three problems with these verses. The first was that wives should submit. I knew women were just as competent as men. If there was wisdom in asymmetrical decision-making in marriage, surely it should depend on who was more competent in the relevant area. My second problem was with the idea that wives should submit to their husbands as to the Lord. It is one thing to submit to Jesus Christ, the self-sacrificing King of the universe. It is quite another to offer that kind of submission to a fallible, sinful man. My third problem was the idea that the husband was the “head” of the wife. This seemed to imply a hierarchy at odds with men and women’s equal status as image bearers of God. This all seemed to pull against the countercultural message of the gospel. ... And yet here were these horrifying verses promoting the subjugation of women.¹

Obviously Rebecca was reacting to the real subjugation and abuse of women that did exist in our Western culture for hundreds of years. It was in the 1900s that women began to demand and to gain rights that men took for granted, like the right to have a bank account, to vote, to work and receive equal pay for equal work. God may well have created men and women as equal in status, but the world did not see it that way. And sadly, neither did the Church in many places. But Paul was not writing to the modern Church (even though, we must keep in mind, God *IS*), rather he is writing to the Ephesians who are a model city of the Ancient Empire of Rome, steeped in the wisdom of the Greeks. A young married woman in Ephesus, hearing Paul’s words for the first time, would have been stunned by the thought that women were suddenly being elevated to the level of personhood. Was she being allowed to submit voluntarily and not to be subjugated as property to the man who had taken her in marriage? This is revolutionary! And since there were far more women in the church at this time than men, these words of Paul could have been taken by the male leaders of the home and

society at large to be the beginning of a revolution. Could Paul's words undermine the authority and the loyalty these men demanded? And what about the command to men: *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... (5:25)?* How far does a new Christian husband take this command? In Roman Ephesus there were three kinds of women in every man's life: wives, servants and prostitutes. He used them all. Wives and children were there to establish stability and provide an heir for the family name. Slaves did the work, but could be used by the man as they desired. Prostitutes were also for the man's pleasure and were considered a part of normal manly social life. It is here the man could echo Rebecca's words in a different way: *"You have got to be kidding me! My wife submits but does not have to obey? I must give up my concubines...my pleasure? I must be willing to die for her?"* We have to understand, what Paul wrote to the Ephesians was a greater threat to male superiority than it was to female freedoms. Perhaps men feel under attack today in our western culture, but men are still in charge, even though the role of women is changing, sometimes for the better, sometimes not. Of course, the real question remains, *"What is biblical?"*

One of the problems we face with the *"Ephesian Passage"* on marriage is that it leaps out at us. It is even set apart in most bibles as a separate section, but it really isn't. Paul is writing a continuous thought beginning in 5:15 *"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise..."* and he ends that thought in 6:9 when he says to the masters of slaves: *"Masters, do the same to them [doing the will of God from the heart as Paul said in v.6], and stop your threatening, knowing that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."* Paul is warning the Masters (it is interesting the Greek word for master is *"kurios"*, or *Lord*), *"You will stand before the same judge with your slaves as equals."* A sobering, and yet another "revolutionary" thought. In the entire section from 5:15-6:9 Paul is addressing everyone as a Son who is intimately united to Jesus. All are equal in terms of status and inheritance and all will be judged and rewarded by exactly the same standard: whether man, woman, child, slave or free. Paul is giving us a preview of what the ideal submission in the New Kingdom, when it comes, will be like. *"But the New Kingdom is not here!"* we cry. No, it's not. But the power to live it is here, if we are willing to submit to Christ and accept the role and the vocation that He has given us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is Kingdom power and Kingdom life that we access in this mysterious Temple—the Church. We have the resources to live wisely in a way the world notices. Living wisely in a way that affects family, work, culture and all of society. There is a great passage in Deuteronomy that expresses this very thing:

"But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?"
(Deu 4:4-7, ESV)

Paul is urging us to the same kind of wisdom as he addresses husband and wife, child and parent, slave and master. Life not just in the family but it is also in the life of the society where we live and work. Another writer, Rachel Evans, put it this way:

But the point of this passage, and of the other New Testament household codes, is not to emphasize the holiness of a single household structure, but rather to admonish Christians to imitate Jesus, no matter where they stand in the sociological pecking order. So men are told to be kind to their slaves, gentle with their children, and loving with their wives. When Christians imitate Jesus in their relationships, when partners in marriage serve one another rather than fight for dominance, we catch a little glimpse of the mystery of Christ's relentless, self-giving love for the church and the consummation of that love that is to come. Marriage is not an inherently holy institution. Rather, marriage is a relationship that is made holy when it reflects the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. All relationships and vocations ...give Christians the opportunity to reflect the grace and peace of the kingdom of God.²

If the Church does not seek to live wisely, as Paul tells us to do, then the only option is foolishness. And foolishness is seen in the way we try to escape the realities of life. We find ways to *"amuse ourselves to death"*³ and to numb ourselves with overwork and achievements, money and the trappings of power. As Christians we cannot look at the culture around us and claim a holiness that does not even come close to matching our lifestyle and the things we love and pursue. Paul's warning *"Do not get drunk with wine"* really fits this context. Paul uses one thing, wine, to represent the whole, that is, *"do not use wine as a way of escape, as an amusement."* Wine is a food meant to be used properly and responsibly. But this is true of everything that God has given us. Wisdom is marked by the proper pursuit of "things". Wisdom comes forth as praise for God in our speech, in our thoughts, and most of all in our daily gratitude. Wisdom is seen in our behavior when we submit to others in a way that honors Christ in us and among us. Paul helps us understand what submission looks like in all of the of relationships he describes from 5:22 all the way to 6:9.

Submission is a recognition of leadership, not an admission of inferiority. On the other side of the coin, leadership is not the subjugation of another person. A good leader knows submission is voluntary. Submission means *"to place yourself under the authority of another."*⁴ A good leader recognizes the talents and the gifts that are being offered. That is very different from subjugation or enforced slavery. Submission is not the same as obedience either. Paul says children must obey their parents, and slaves must obey their masters (their *lords*). There is no option, meaning obedience is not really voluntary. Children have to be educated and trained on how to become submissive to a leader. Paul tells servants their submission is to Christ, and no matter how harshly the master treats them they must obey (with the hope that the Lord will remedy their situation). Submission requires understanding and maturity, obedience does not. So a wife is never told to obey the husband. A wife can disagree with her husband's decision and question his motives. A wife must never obey his demand to sin. It is a relationship of equals, but it is two people without a tie breaker to intervene. When a decision must be made, the decision goes to the leader, the husband, for good or ill. The wife is his support and helper in the project of life. The woman who is wise? There is a proverb: *The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish one tears her house down...*(14:1) The wise woman is a supporting foundation. The word house means more than a physical building. She helps set and maintain the foundations for the family life—socially, economically, materially, emotionally, spiritually. The husband's role, as the head, is to be the overseer and director of the entire project.

The responsibility ultimately rests on him. The overall success of the house depends on both. Each person comes with gifts and skills, differing points of view, yet they merge them into one, as God said, "...*the two shall become one flesh*" (or perhaps, "*one house?*")

One of the great models for the home is in Proverbs 31 (and I recommend you take time to read this chapter carefully, if you never have). The wife in this chapter is administrator, broker and craftswoman:

She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.(31:13–16) She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.(31:24–25)

Here is a wise woman, building a house that shouts *strength and dignity*, not just wealth and achievement. She is involved in public commerce in a way that does not detract from her life at home, but rather enhances it. She is not only a wife but a master of slaves. She is also a mother who must teach her children. They see what she does. How much more will they learn from watching her, as well as from hearing what she says? And I am sure she grew from being an obedient child into a woman who honors her parents, just as she honors her husband, and as she honors the Lord. This woman, this wife, sets before us a very high ideal. But isn't she the kind of model we want? Proverbs shows us the choice: the woman who builds the house, or the woman who tears it down. It really is up to us.

So I think the way Paul sets up this discourse on husbands, wives, slaves, masters and children makes us think: "*Who are God's children, ...His servants? Who is His wife?*" Stop and think about it; Christians are given all three positions. We are children who must obey, because we are really ignorant compared to what God knows. Jesus said, "*You are the sheep* (and sheep are really stupid) *and I am the shepherd* (the leader)." We are also slaves who must obey, yet we have a Master who will never mistreat us, even cherishes us. But what is the real beauty in Paul's description? We are the bride. All of us together, this massive plurality of people, are *ONE* with our Head, who is our Husband. And this is really the focal point of everything Paul has said in the whole letter. Look at the language in 5:23-33 and see how it zeroes in on Christ and who He is: v.23 ...*Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 ...the church submits to Christ. 25-27 ...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 29-30 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. Notice over and over: Christ and the Church...the Church and Christ...headship and submission... And how He cherishes us and cares for us! What a husband we have!*

We are all called equally, with our gifts and differences, to voluntarily support and honor this One who cherishes us in ways we can never comprehend. Jesus left His Father and His Glory to put Himself on equal ground with us, even though we often think of Him as far above us. But He is *NOT!* He is still "*God With Us*" as He cleanses us from sin everyday (1 Jn 1:7), as He walks among us correcting, commending, even

condemning His people because He loves us (Rev 2-3). In the picture Paul paints here of husband, wife, Christ and Church, submission is not about ability or talent or gender, but order. In the Church Jesus is our leader and in the family the husband is the leader, in the home the parents are the leader, on my job the manager over me is my leader. As Rachel Evans said above *“All relationships and vocations ...give Christians the opportunity to reflect the grace and peace of the kingdom of God.”* This Kingdom is where Adam and Eve lived before their fall: *“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.(5:31-32) Paul quotes Genesis 2 and he knows what he is saying; that the Church as the Bride of the Messiah is *not* the metaphor, but our marriages are the metaphor of the reality of God’s relationship to us as His people. Paul says this is a profound mystery! I think we will spend thousands of years in the New Age trying to comprehend it. And Paul’s final word on how to apply this? *However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*(5:33)

I close with a final thought from Rebecca McLaughlin: *“In one sense, human marriage is designed to disappoint. It leaves us longing for more, and that longing points us to the ultimate reality...”*⁵ See? Maybe the *real* marriage is Christ and the Church, and on this side of Glory even the best marriage is, at best, a mere shadow of reality.

Our Father, to think we can come to you day after day with the same weakness, sometimes the same sin, the same soiled clothing, and you cleanse us with the blood of your beloved son. And Jesus, because you died for us, you are doing everything you can for us, to hold us and cherish us, to remove from us any defect, every flaw, so one day all of us will stand with you as ONE, before our Father forever, in that wonderful Kingdom that will have no end. And Holy Spirit we seek you because it is through your power working within us that we can even hope for that day when we will stand as the most beautiful bride the world will ever see! It is in the name of our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

¹McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* (pp. 139-140). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

²Rachel Evans, *“Searching for Sunday”* p. 242-243 Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³Postman, Neil. *Amusing ourselves to death*. Viking Penguin Inc. 1985

The expression I use is a tribute to this book from the early 1980s.

An excerpt: “Today we must look to the city of Las Vegas as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.” pp.3-4 Is he describing the America of 1985 or 2021? Hard to tell!

⁴ὑποτάσσω present tense middle voice *hypotassomai*; to arrange yourself under, to subordinate yourself; put yourself in subjection.

Thayer, Joseph. *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT* ref.5293.

The definition I use applies to this context because Paul uses it to contrast with the stronger word hupakouō: obey, obedience in 6:1 and 6:5.

⁵McLaughlin, Rebecca, *Ibid.* (p. 141)