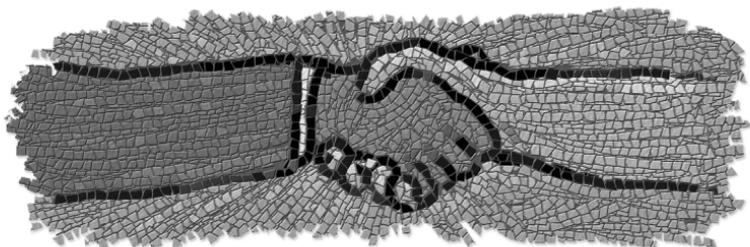


Christian Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 20:12; Judges 1:21; Luke 9:23; John 3:13; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:21-33; 6:1-9; 1 John 4:10, 11.*

Memory Text: “Submitting to one another in the fear of God” (*Ephesians 5:21, NKJV*).

Ephesians 1–3 gave us the basic theology of the church. From chapter 4 on, Paul discusses the practical application of this theology and how it applies to the Christian life, which, among other things, preserves unity amid diversity, emphasizes the Christian walk, and (as we'll study now) builds adequate relationships.

In the final analysis, Christianity is a religion of relationships, relationships with God and with each other. It makes no sense to claim to have a vital relationship with God without that relationship impacting how we relate to family and community. Church, home, and work are the primary arenas of Christian living. One cannot be a saint in the church and a devil at home. Christianity is not holiness in a vacuum. It is holiness in wholeness; that is, it affects every dimension of living—spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social. This week's lesson turns to principles of Christian relationships.

The Week at a Glance: What is Christian submission? How are those in authority supposed to act toward those under their authority? How are husbands and wives to relate to each other? What does Paul write about parent/child relationships?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 10.*

Submit to One Another (*Eph. 5:21*).

Read Ephesians 5:21. What is Paul saying here to us?

The verse is connected to the clause in Ephesians 5:18: “Be filled with the Spirit” (*NKJV*). Christian submission must not be equated with servility but rather with a proper attitude of humility and consideration to each other. Admittedly, such an attitude is not part of the natural self but a result of being “filled” with the Spirit, as was the case with fellowship and worship, singing and praising, and continual thanksgiving (*Eph. 5:19, 20*).

Viewed thus, submission does not carry the meaning we normally attribute to it. The biblical view of submission in no way teaches a dictatorial, authoritarian, unjust stance in social relationships where one exercises power and the other crawls in helplessness.

Indeed, Paul adds a qualifying clause to his counsel on submission: “in the fear of God” or “out of reverence for Christ” (*NIV*). The Christians’ conduct and relationship with each other—be it between husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave—does involve submission but in the context of reverence for Christ. God is not a wrecker but a builder. He is not dictatorial and selfish but loving. Reverence for Christ draws a line beyond which the call for submission does not extend. Where submission is a violation of one’s conscience or contradictory to God’s will, Peter’s bold stance, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*), must take over. What should a wife or daughter do when the man of the house insists she go into prostitution in order to meet his economic demands? What should a child do if the father commands him to be a street-corner vender for drugs? Submit? Never. Submission in human relationships is never absolute and unquestioned. As its border, it has the will of God. When a so-called Christian expects submission beyond that border, that person has no right to be called a Christian and deserves to be dismissed from any Christian privilege. Submission “in the fear of God” (*Eph. 5:21*) demands respect on the part of wife and dignity and honor on the part of husband. This is even more crucial in an age such as ours, during which spousal and child abuse abound. No child of God should become or should be treated as a doormat.

It’s one thing to submit when we shouldn’t submit, but what about submitting when we really need to? Sometimes that’s even harder. Why is the foot of the Cross the only place where we can learn the meaning of Christian submission? What role does death to self play in submission? See Luke 9:23.

Authority (*Eph. 5:22; 6:1, 5*)

The question of submission and obedience on the part of a wife, a child, or a slave raises the issue of authority. Upon what authority does a husband, a father, and a master expect submission and obedience? Ephesians 5:21 says submission is to be “in the fear of God” or “out of reverence for Christ” (*NIV*). Similar phrases occur in other places: “as to the Lord” (*vs. 22, NKJV*), “in the Lord” (*Eph. 6:1*), “as to Christ” (*vs. 5, NKJV*). These repeated references to Christ seem to indicate a divine order to this authority structure. Even though Paul does not elaborate on this point, he provides a useful analogy in the relationship between Christ and the church. “Christ is head of the church,” and, therefore, “the church is subject to Christ” (*Eph. 5:23, 24, NKJV*). The headship of Christ is the model to which the church subjects itself. Likewise, the headship of the husband, father, and master is to follow the model established by Christianity. Authority is not tyranny nor is it without limits. In fact, Paul argues that both authority and submission are as in Christ, who “loved the church, and gave himself for it” (*vs. 25*). This point cannot be overemphasized. Love, not power, is the motivation behind the authority given to preserve the order of an organizational unit such as home or household. Similarly, love, not fear or a feeling of inferiority, is the motivation for submission.

What do these verses say about Christian human relationships?

Gen. 1:26, 27

Acts 17:26

Gal. 3:28

Eph. 3:6

Before the Lord we are all the same: sinners in need of divine grace. Though the concepts of authority and submission have been perverted, that doesn't mean they aren't biblical. Those in positions of authority must always remember who they are in relationship to God and to others who might be under that authority. To pervert this role is, surely, a grievous sin before the Lord, who knows even if a sparrow falls to the ground (*Matt. 10:29-31*).

If some people need to learn submission at the foot of the Cross, what can those in authority learn at the Cross that could help them use their authority in a God-given manner?

Husbands and Wives (*Eph. 5:22-25*)

As we read the verses for today, we can see that marriage is a divine institution, with husband and wife being equal partners (*Gen. 2:24, Eph. 5:31*). The unity and equality of the partners is stressed in the divine utterance that the two “shall become one flesh” (*vs. 31, NKJV*). Compare this with Ephesians 2:14, which speaks of how Christ made one out of two (Jew and Gentile), and you will realize the marvel of the divine origin of both marriage and church.

Also, Christ and the church are closely linked. Christ is the Head, and the church is the body (*5:23*). Without stretching the metaphor to dangerous proportions, it must be noted: (a) As body, the church is subordinate to Christ, the Head; (b) as Head, Christ loves His body the church, died for it, saved it, and sanctified it.

Submission and love do not antagonize the partners in marriage but bring them together. After all, submission means to give oneself up completely to the other. Love means the same thing and includes loving to the extent of dying for the other, even as Christ did.

How does the metaphor of Christ’s relationship to the church help us understand how the husband is to relate to the wife? What force must be the prime motivator? See *Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10, 11; Jude 21*.

This intimate relationship between Christ and the church should be reflected between husband and wife. And though Paul and Peter are clear that wives are to “submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:22, NKJV; see also Col. 3:18, 1 Pet. 3:1*), he balances that by telling the husbands they must love their wives (*see Eph. 5:25, 28; Col. 3:19*). This love is to be modeled after Christ’s love (*Eph. 5:25*)—unreserved and sacrificial. The husband’s headship spells not tyranny but responsibility in a partnership, while submission means not servility but honor, fidelity, and respect. Of course, we need to recognize human frailties: There are husbands who treat their wives as servants and abuse them endlessly. But that is a cultural and sin problem that Paul is not addressing here.

What are some of the forces in your own society and culture that are warring against marriage? How is what Paul wrote here a powerful means to protect marriage against those forces?

Children and Parents *(Exod. 20:12, Eph. 6:1-4)*

No other religion or philosophy has done as much for children as Christianity. William Wilberforce, a devout Christian, ended child labor in England. William Carey, the pioneer of Christian missions, acted to end child marriage and widow burning in India. Today in some rural areas in southern India, female infants are choked or poisoned to death, and Christian hospitals and pastors have set up cradles outside their doors so that unwanted female infants could be placed there without anyone noticing.

Roman culture during the time of the apostle Paul was even worse. Barclay quotes the famous Seneca: “We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge the knife into sickly cattle lest they taint the herd; children who are born weakly and deformed we drown.”—*The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 176.

At a time like that, Paul writes to Christian parents and their children in a famous Roman city. How delighted the children must have been to be acknowledged in the letter from the great apostle.

What two things are expected of children? At the same time, how does Paul qualify his words regarding children and their parents? How does that qualification parallel what Paul says to wives regarding how they should relate to their husbands? What differences are there, as well? *Eph. 6:1-4; see also Eph. 5:22, Col. 3:18.*

Paul offers two reasons for obedience. First, it is right; it is the natural, accepted norm in every society. Second, God’s moral law demands it.

Christian artists have depicted the law on two tablets: one containing the first four commandments and the other the last six—dividing our duty to God and to humans. But Jews had five on each table, as if to signify that honor to parents belongs with honor to God.

While obedience is expected of children when they are dependent on parents, honor toward them is a lifelong duty.

Paul counsels parents not to “provoke your children to wrath” (*Eph. 6:4, NKJV*). Think of some things that may do just that: poor example, hypocrisy, inconsistency, harshness. What else?

What forces in your society work against strong and loving parental/child relationships? What does Christianity offer that can protect those relationships?

Slaves and Masters (*Eph. 6:5-9*)

The Roman Empire had millions of slaves during Paul's day. The entire economic and social structure depended on slave labor. Slaves, for the most part, were treated as no better than working animals. Even a great man like Aristotle taught that slaves were only work tools. Ownership of one human being by another without any regard or respect to that individual's God-given rights and dignity must have been revolting to a sensitive and deeply spiritual leader like Paul.

Paul counsels the slaves in Ephesus to obey their masters and do their work as if they are doing it for Christ (*Eph. 6:5*). Work done in sincerity and goodwill "as to the Lord, and not to men" will not go unrewarded (*vs. 7, 8, NKJV*). Paul recognizes that slaves cannot change their circumstances, but they can conquer them. There we have a good Christian philosophy: While we cannot destroy evil at the moment, we must not let evil destroy us.

Though there's no direct condemnation of the practice of slavery in the Bible, how do the following texts in their own way speak out against the principles behind the practice? *Matt. 22:39, Mark 10:44, Luke 6:31, Rom. 12:10, Phil. 2:3, 1 John 4:11.*

Paul's counsel to the masters is also quite pointed. He reminds them that they, too, have a Master in heaven, from whom they have received grace and forgiveness of sins. Hence his appeal for the slave owners to be gentle, not threatening, toward their servants (*Eph. 6:9*).

Why didn't Paul do anything more? "It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 459, 460.

Paul's ministry did bear fruit, and many slave owners became ardent Christians, along with their slaves.

Philemon is a good example. Paul, sending back this escaped slave, Onesimus, writes to Philemon to accept him "no longer as a slave but . . . as a beloved brother" (*Philem. 16, NKJV*).

What principles can you take from Paul's words that can help you better understand how you should act (depending upon your situation) toward either your boss or those who work under you or both?

Further Study: *Parents and children.* “Parents, God desires you to make your family a sample of the family in heaven. Guard your children. Be kind and tender with them. Father, mother, and children are to be joined together with the golden links of love. One well-ordered, well-disciplined family is a greater power in demonstrating the efficiency of Christianity than all the sermons in the world.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1118.

“The Lord Jesus has not been correctly represented in His relation to the church by many husbands in their relation to their wives, for they do not keep the way of the Lord. They declare that their wives must be subject to them in everything. But it was not the design of God that the husband should have control, as head of the house, when he himself does not submit to Christ. He must be under the rule of Christ that he may represent the relation of Christ to the church. If he is a coarse, rough, boisterous, egotistical, harsh, and overbearing man, let him never utter the word that the husband is the head of the wife, and that she must submit to him in everything; for he is not the Lord, he is not the husband in the true significance of the term.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 117.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ **Supposing you are made aware that one of your church members is involved in spousal abuse; how should the church handle the issue?**
- ❷ **As a church, should we keep silent about important social issues, or should we get involved? Are there some issues better left alone? If so, how do we determine what they are? Also, discuss these questions: In what ways can getting involved in social concerns deflect us from our real mission? Or, are social concerns part of our real mission?**
- ❸ **As a class, talk about the questions asked at the end of Tuesday’s and Wednesday’s lessons. What are the forces working against our families, and what can you as a class do that could help local church members as they face these assaults?**

“Bless My Son”

by KAREN GLASSFORD

“Please madam, bless my son,” the man pleaded.

I was a member of an evangelistic team that had traveled to India to teach people about the only true God, to wrest them from their fear and darkness and bring them to the light of Christ.

“What is wrong with your son?” I asked the man.

“Hand not work, long time,” he said, holding up his son’s stiff arm. The thin fingers had curled into a tight ball and refused to move.

I burrowed my finger inside his fist and asked, “Can you squeeze my hand?” His sad brown eyes looked at me as he tried to move his fingers. But he could not move them. He wanted me to know that he understood my request, so he grabbed my hand with his good hand and squeezed hard.

“Oh Lord,” I prayed, “I do not know what this man and his son know about You, but they have come asking for Your healing touch. This boy cannot play as other boys do, and when he is grown it will be hard for him to earn a living unless he can use both of his hands. Please Lord, if it is Your will, heal this little boy and fill him with your love. . . .”

A gasp startled my eyes open, and I stared at the boy. His face glowed with wonder and amazement as he watched his fingers relax from their tight fist. Slowly he wriggled his stiff little fingers, then he moved his wrist, which also had been stiff just moments before. A smile streaked across the boy’s face, and his eyes shone with joy.

I squeaked out an emotional “amen,” too moved to say anymore. I had just watched the God of the universe step down into a tiny rice field outside a little Indian village and take note of a little boy’s need.

Night after night during the meetings, people came to hear the message of God’s love. Some, like this little boy, came for healing. Hope struggled against fear as they made decisions to give up their idols and cling to Jesus instead. Joy filled their eyes as they realized that this Jesus truly is the God who made heaven, earth, and them. With new hope and a new purpose in their hearts, they are starting their journey to heaven and an eternity worth looking forward to.

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