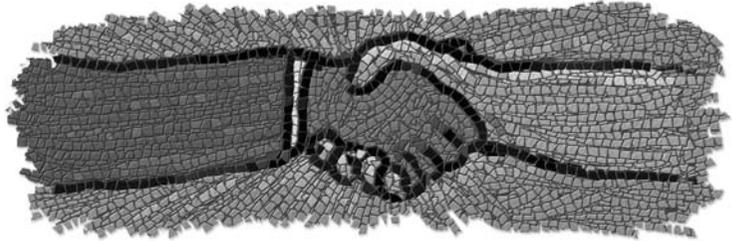


# Christian Relationships



## 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*).

**E**phesians 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*.**

**Key Text:** *Ephesians 5:21-24*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To stress that Christianity is based upon relationships.
2. To understand that human relationships are to mirror our relationships with, and our submission to, Christ.
3. To discuss how Christianity should result in stronger and more harmonious relationships.

### Lesson Outline:

#### I. Submission and Responsibility (*Eph. 5:21*)

- A. Submission, in a Christian sense, is not identical to mindless servility.
- B. Even in human relationships where submission is proper, one's conscience and God's will come first.
- C. The role of the individual to whom one may submit as a Christian is one of responsibility, not of absolute power.

#### II. Submitting to Christ (*Eph. 5:23, 24*)

- A. Christ is in authority over all of us.
- B. Those in authority must be aware that that authority is lent to them by Christ and is to be used unselfishly and wisely.
- C. Authority and submission are meaningless if Christ's love is absent.

#### III. Living in Harmony (*Eph. 5:33*)

- A. Christianity supports the traditions and customs of any given society to the extent that they are just.
- B. In honoring spouses and parents, we are honoring God.
- C. Paul recommends that those who find themselves in unfair situations overcome injustice with love.

**Summary:** Since Christ is the central figure of Christianity, we are to model our approach to life on His. This includes our response to those in authority over us and our use of any authority that we may have over others. Christ, although He had rightful authority over all, became servant of all. Most power conflicts and abuses of authority that we see in the world arise from failure to follow this example.

## COMMENTARY

Christianity is not a philosophy. It is the good news of redeemed relationships. The gospel shows its power not in the arena of Athens or in the chambers of the Roman senate but in the church of Antioch, on the streets of Ephesus, and in the workplaces of Laodicea. Paul knows that a theology of redemption—wondrous as it is—can have relevance only if it creates a world of new relationships.

Our study (*Eph. 5:21-33, 6:1-9*) is about relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, masters and slaves. Each

## **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*

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*Acts 17:26*

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*Gal. 3:28*

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*Eph. 3:6*

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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?**

of these relationships is qualified by the phrase “in Christ” or “as in the Lord.” Authentic relationship is possible only in Christ. But first, a clarification on submission and authority.

### **I. Relationships: Submission and Authority** (*Eph. 5:21*)

Paul begins with a general statement: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (*Eph. 5:21*). One may question whether Paul meant this for our generation when forces everywhere are clamoring for less authority and more freedom. No philosophy or ideology is better qualified to speak of human equality and dignity than Christianity. Paul has established that point already in Ephesians 2, and he repeats that in God “there is no favoritism with him” (6:9, *NIV*). The apostle is a democrat of the first order. When he speaks of submission, therefore, he is not speaking of servility but an attitude of humility and consideration. Relationship in a redeemed community should be one of respect for one another. But even for this, the apostle places a defining parameter: “in the fear of God”; that is, “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21, *NIV*). The mind of the Incarnate One is one of submission and humility (*Phil. 2:5-8*) that God’s plans may be fulfilled. It is in this context that Paul pleads for self-abnegation *out of reverence for Christ*.

### **II. Relationships: Between Spouses** (*Eph. 5:22, 33*)

This long passage (*vss. 22-33*) is a Christian testament on the sacredness of marriage, which we need to affirm ever more strongly at a time when marriage is under attack. The divorce rate is ever-increasing, and the role of the home in society gets increasingly neglected. The apostle urges the believers to give heed to two significant points:

*First, God created marriage* (*Gen. 2:21, 22; Eph. 5:31*). He ordained the male and the female to become one flesh. Out of this ordination, marriage receives its sanctity. When the two became one, neither could claim supremacy over the other nor have the right to abuse or suppress the other. The fact that marriage is, unfortunately, a victim of such deviations is to be located not in the institution of marriage but in the root cause of all our problems; namely, sin. So, to deal with deviations such as claims of supremacy or subjugation in marital relationships, we must direct our attention to the problem of sin and not attack the sanctity of marriage.

*Second, in marriage the husband is described as the head, even as Christ is Head of the church.* As Head, what did Christ do to the church? Was He a manipulator or dictator, abusing the church or violating her will? Christ’s headship is defined in what He did: He loved the church, sacrificed Himself (*Eph. 5:25*), and did all that is necessary to make it glorious and holy (*vs. 27*). Christ cherishes and

## 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*.

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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?**

nourishes the church (*vs. 29*). Because Christ did all this, the church's response is love and respect for Christ. The church is like a bride with her bridegroom (Christ).

Transfer this idea to the husband and wife relationship. Paul is commanding the husband to do what Christ did and the wife to respond as the church did. There is no question of the husband asserting superiority or the wife being subjected to servility and abuse. The husband-wife relationship is marked by giving and responding in total love, just as the Christ-church relationship reveals the same. Between husband and wife, headship does not mean tyranny but responsibility; subjection does not mean servility but fidelity and respect; obedience does not mean slavishly yielding to irrational demands but harmony of will and purpose within the sanctity and security of marriage.

### III. Relationships: Between Parents and Children (*Eph. 6:1-4*)

Christian education must begin in a Christian home, and the first lesson children ought to learn must be obedience and honor to parents *in the Lord*. The first responsibility that parents ought to have is to be a consistent model, *not provoking their children to anger* through a life of hypocrisy and inconsistency. "One well-ordered,

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Luke 9:23, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 5:21-33, Jude 21*

❶ Ephesians 5:22-24 has been used and continues to be used to victimize and subjugate women. However, when studied within their proper context of verses 25-33, what picture do we get? (*Also read verse 21.*)

❷ If you had sculpting clay or artist paints and a palate, how would you depict God's concept of authority and power? How does Ephesians 5:25 help you craft your work? How would you help a friend who is in an abusive relationship or who is abusing his or her spouse? Plan to seek out resources that would educate your caring for them.

❸ The Bible often uses marriage as an analogy for Christ's relationship to the church. How would you describe His caring? (*Eph. 5:29-32*). Why is this relationship such a "profound mystery" (*vs. 32, NIV*) to us? Discuss the concepts of unity and equality in the home and church. What force makes these relationships possible? (*See John 3:16; 13:3, 4; Rom. 5:8.*)

## 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.*

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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?**

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.

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

Paul’s counsel to slaves to obey their masters is misinterpreted by some as tolerance toward slavery; however, it is far from that. The same apostle writes to Philemon to accept his escaped slave, Onesimus, “no longer as a slave . . . but . . . as a beloved brother” (*Philem. 16, NKJV*). Paul’s attitude toward slavery is simple: He does not approve it but counsels the slaves that they are indeed free where freedom counts—in the Lord—and so just keep doing their routine work *as to the Lord*. Paul’s advice to the masters is to be

## Witnessing

Practicing the five foundational graces is not always as easy as it should be, even for the most committed Christian. Situations that bring us to our knees time and time again, because they call for us to exercise humility, gentleness, longsuffering (patience), forbearance, and love, teach us just how dependent we are on the Lord for the development of those graces.

It is not easy to practice *humility* when someone deliberately goes out of his or her way to tear you down and undermine you.

It is not easy to practice *gentleness* when people taunt, goad, and take advantage of you because they believe your mild-manneredness is simply a display of weakness on your part.

It is not easy to practice *longsuffering* when the poor behavior of others drives you to the brink of your endurance time and time (and time!) again.

It is not easy to practice *forbearance* when the other individual is unwilling to work with you; when she or he will not meet you partway, halfway, or any way!

Most of all, it is not easy to *love unconditionally* at all times, especially when the above human behaviors are swirling around you.

Jesus did not promise that the Christian life would always be easy. He did promise, however, that He would supply us with the strength to follow His example and walk in His footsteps. So, although it may seem nearly impossible during difficult times, our ability to apply the five graces at all times, in all circumstances, will grow and mature as our walk with Him grows and matures.

Pray every day that God will give you an overflowing abundance of grace under fire.

## 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 (*vss. 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.*

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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?**

gentle and kind toward their servants (*Eph. 6:9*), keeping in mind that they, too, have a Master in heaven. The heavenly Master speaks loud and clear that slavery is another of those ills that will be wiped out when the gospel takes full hold of people.

## Life-Application Approach:

**Icebreaker:** Count the fingers on your hands. Are there ten? If you are missing a digit, how did it happen? Why might you wish you could reverse time and have both your hands complete, “For we are all members of his body”? (*Eph. 5:30, NIV*). Take a moment to recall members that are consistently missing from your Sabbath School or congregation. How does their absence make you incomplete, even handicapped? Discuss what you could do to “turn back time” and reclaim them.

### Thought Questions:

❶ Think about a time when you made a glaring mistake in a very public way. How did you get over it? Why is that situation still so vivid? Someone might say, “It’s like it just happened yesterday.” Jesus forgave the paralytic (*see Luke 5:23*) before He healed him. Why was this so important? How can Jesus help you move from failures in the past to a miraculous new life now?

❷ When we present cooking schools, we show attendees how to make new dishes. We demonstrate ways to lead healthier lives. “God demonstrates his own love toward us” (*Rom. 5:8, NKJV*) through salvation and the power to live victorious lives. How does the concept of submission (*Eph. 5:21, 24, 29*) bless our relationships at home, at church, and where we work? How can we prevent the call to submit to one another from becoming an opportunity to abuse or dominate others, or to become a “doormat”?

### Application Question:

Consider the choices you had to make this morning as you prepared for your day. How did you decide whether or not to shower, what to wear, and what to have for breakfast? Jude invites us to “keep [ourselves] in God’s love” (*vs. 21, NIV*). What makes following this admonition possible? Why is our choice to be in a relationship with God so critical? This coming week, share why you choose to walk with God every day with one of your co-workers who is experiencing a difficult decision or a crisis.

**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?