



THE COMMUNITY

Submission | CHRIST-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

We saw last week in v. 18 and following that a Spirit-filled life results in: “addressing one another with psalms and hymns, singing and making music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks for everything, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” In this week’s passage it is as if Paul double-clicks on “submitting” and elaborates with instructions for various relationships.

He describes three sets of relationships, each displaying a certain order in family or society: (1) husband/wife, (2) parent/child and (3) slave/master. Paul wants the Ephesians to see that their new life in Christ should transform their relationships. Becoming a Christian means re-orienting the most basic aspects of life together.

As the leader, you should be aware that this passage may arouse some difficult, charged and personal conversation. It would be useful to understand that slavery during the first century was not like slavery in more recent western history. Furthermore, Paul’s lack of explicit prohibition of slavery could be misunderstood to condone it. Read Philemon to see Paul’s response to a slave holder who is also a brother regarding a slave who has become a Christian. Or look at 1Tim 1:9,10 for his general perspective on the slave trade.

The section on children and fathers may be difficult for people who have unhealthy relationships with their parents.

The section to wives and husbands could unfortunately be seen as archaic at best and chauvinistic at worst. Careful study of the passage will go far to correct this misunderstanding and, even more importantly, to expose the riches of God’s mercy, as the gospel is portrayed in Christian marriages. Because this section can so quickly be charged and reaction-driven, it will be important to show what fuels marriage from a biblical perspective. That is why the lead question in the marriage section below focuses our attention on relationship between Christ and the church, which is not only the inspiration of marriage but also the goal of marriage.

Marriage is a theme that runs through the entire Bible. In Gen 1:26-28 and 2:21-24 we see that God made Adam and Eve for each other. They were two individuals but they were united as one flesh.

What’s the Big Idea?

When we relate to each other and with those outside of the body, we do so as new people who have been made alive with Christ. The gospel demands and transforms our interactions with each other. Fundamentally, we live out our relationships with God as the center of our lives, expressing respect and care in appropriate ways.

What’s the Problem?

The fall ruined our ability to relate to each other. Those in authority tend towards dominance or abdication. Those under authority tend toward rebellion or disrespect. We need reorientation from Christ on how to interact.

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Submission | Christ-Centered Relationships

The union pictured in marriage is used by God to mirror His relationship to His people. Whenever you read God saying something like, “I will be their God, they will be my people,” He’s saying He is in a special, exclusive, and covenanted relationship with us. This is why God can refer to idolatrous Israel as a prostitute who is unfaithful to her husband (Hosea 3:1). In the New Testament we see that Jesus Himself is to be the groom of God’s people, the bride (John 3:29). He promises the celebration of all celebrations when He is united perfectly and permanently to them in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 19:7; 21:1-3). Until then we wait patiently and longingly as Jesus prepares to present the church to Himself as glorious bride (v. 27)

In our passage Paul is not just searching for some analogy that will help conceptually connect God’s love for His people to something tangible. No, what we learn is that marriage was instituted from the beginning to eventually reveal the ultimate marriage and union, perfectly seen and experienced in Christ’s one flesh relationship to the church. Human marriage was only a blueprint intended to sketch out the final, intended reality.

Understand submission in light of this relationship. The church submits to the one who not only created her but also gave His life for her (v. 25). Therefore, one sees the intention of human marriage in mirroring this unfathomable love story of Christ and the church. The relationship between a husband and wife should be a picture or a rehearsal of the gospel.

Marriage after the fall was distorted. A wife’s desire was to undermine her husband’s leadership. Unfortunately, the husband’s response was not that of tender correction but of domineering rule (Gen 3:16). In Christ, however, marriage becomes what it ought to be. No longer does the wife undermine her husband’s place as head, but she submits to him in all things (v. 22). No longer does a husband use his authority and strength against his wife and for selfish gain, but he sacrificially loves her and cares for her as part of his own body (v. 25). Their respect and love for one another is part of their worship and response to Christ’s love as members of his body.

What’s Our Response?

You want to help your group demonstrate love and respect in all their relationships, being compelled by God’s love for us in Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-21

The Questions

Leader: Don't forget to read the background info, as it addresses potential points of tension and how best to handle them.

Prioritize the last question in the study about the Holy Spirit. If you're running short on time, skip other questions to make sure that this one is discussed.

There are more questions in this study than normal. However, many of them can be discussed briefly and then you can quickly move on to the next question. Just keep this in mind as you are preparing and perhaps highlight a few questions in advance that you want to make sure you get to/that you would be okay skipping if it looks like you'll run out of time.

If the question of why only fathers are addressed in 6:4 comes up, explain that in that culture, fathers had absolute authority which was easily abused. Children may have been seen as property. You could imagine the possibility for cruelty.

If the question of whether Paul's instructions to husbands and wives are interchangeable comes up, this is what you can bring up: They are not interchangeable. The Christ/church comparison makes it impossible to blur the distinction into a general command like "be nice to each other." Christ does not submit to the church, but uses His leadership sacrificially.

Potential Launch Question: If you were describing to a non-Christian friend how your relationship with God changed/affects the relationships in your life, what would you say?

Q: As you read through this passage, what jumps out as significant to you?

A: *Allow the group to discuss. Keep an open ear to what they saw in the passage.*

Read 5:22-33

Q: What do we learn about Christ and the church from this passage?

A: *See "What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?" Christ sacrificed Himself for His church when He died to provide all she needed. The church submits to Christ as the head - the church submits to the one who not only created her but also gave His life for her (v. 25).*

Q: How does Paul's teaching about the relationship between Christ and the church shape the way that husbands and wives are to relate? How does Christ transform a marriage relationship?

A: *Marriage was designed to be a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. The submission and love seen between Christ and the church should be imitated by wives and husbands.*

Through the gospel, Jesus gives us an example of love and a personal experience of it. In addition, He invites husbands and wives to indirectly proclaim the gospel through their own marriage.

Read 6:1-4

Q: Paul commands children to obey their parents "in the Lord." Which of the following seems to make more sense of "in the Lord" and why? (1) Obey your parents as long as they are Christians -OR- (2) Obey your parents as part of your new life in Christ.

A: *It's the latter. Christian children should obey their parent, even if they are non-Christians, as long as their parents are not requiring them to sin.*

If there's time, feel free to note here as well that Paul quotes Exodus 20:12 in v. 2-3. We're called to obey our parent's while under their supervision. We're called to honor them all our lives.

Q: How does Christ transform the parent/child relationship?

A: *Allow the group to discuss. Parents are to lovingly lead their children, not abusing their authority – just as Christ lovingly leads and guides us in His ways. Children are to respectfully submit to their parent’s authority – obeying and honoring them, just as Christ obeyed the Father.*

Read 6:5-9

Q: What instructions does Paul offer to Christian slaves? How are they to serve their masters? What does this show that Paul wants them to understand about their identity?

A: *Paul focuses on their heart response to Christ. He wants them to see themselves primarily as slaves of Christ.*

Q: What instructions does Paul offer to masters? What do you think Paul means when he says, “do the same things”? What is Paul requiring of masters and why?

A: *Masters are likewise to treat their slaves “with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart,” as they would Christ. He wants them to understand that they have a master in heaven to whom they will give account.*

Q: Notice all the references to “Lord” in v.5-9. How does Christ transform the slave/master relationship?

A: *Allow the group to discuss. The Christian slave and master are to focus more on Jesus than on their position. This results in attitudes and actions far different than what one would otherwise expect.*

In light of 5:22-6:9

Q: What common element does Paul include in his instructions to each group?

A: *Each instruction relates to, is assumed, or is derived from Christians’ relationship to Christ, the Lord. In one sense, every relationship becomes a Christ-centered relationship.*

Q: How would you summarize Paul’s vision for Christ-centered relationships in this passage?

A: *When we relate to others, we do so as new people who have been made alive with Christ. All our interactions are transformed. We live out our relationships with God as the center of our lives, expressing respect and care in appropriate ways.*

****If running short on time, form this question as a statement to transition into the Application Questions****

Application Questions

Q: Remembering that this passage flows from Paul’s instruction on appropriately submitting to authority, would you say you are more tempted to oppose or to abuse authority? How so?

A: *Allow the group to discuss.*

Q: What would it look like for Christ to be at the center of your relationships? Of those where you’re tempted to oppose/abuse authority from the last question? Of your relationship with your parents? With your professors?

A: *Allow the group to discuss.*

Q: Which of the instructions Paul gives is most difficult for you to hear and obey? Tell us about it.

A: *Allow the group to discuss. It may be helpful to summarize the instructions as the group processes the question: Wives, submit to your husbands, as the church submits to Christ; Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church (sacrificially); Children obey your parents; Parents don't exasperate your children, but bring them up in the ways of the Lord; Slaves, wholeheartedly obey your masters, as you would the Lord; Masters, likewise treat your slaves with respect, fear, and sincerity of heart.*

Q: How might completely seeing Christ as the ultimate husband, the perfect father or the heavenly master bring joyful willingness to that difficult command?

A: *Allow the group to discuss. It is a lot easier to submit to someone when you know they have your best interest at heart. This is true of God, and seeing Him that way helps us to joyfully obey His commands.*

Q: Which of the following is hardest for you to believe? Why?

The Husband, who lovingly sacrifices himself for his bride.

The Father, who leads his children into eternal life.

The Master, who rewards his slaves for their good work.

A: *Allow the group to discuss. Afterward, either immediately or when you pray at the end, pray for God to enable everyone in your group to believe these things of Him at a heart-level.*

****Q:** Where do we find the power to live out this vision for Christ-centered relationships?

****A:** *Take them back to Ephesians 5:18 and show them how the filling of the Spirit is necessary to live out these relationships. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live as God has called us to live.*

Memory Verse

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

(Ephesians 5:21)