Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9

Introduction

A man was telling his friend about a row he'd had with his wife the night before. "It ended," he said, "when she came crawling to me on her hands and knees."

His friend looked astonished. "What did she say?"

The man grinned. "She said, 'Come out from under that bed, you coward!'"

Well, this passage has quite a bit to say about husbands and wives, but before we look at that, let's read the key verse again, verse 21: **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** Our first heading:

Submit to one another

What the Bible says in these four simple words is the key to understanding this whole passage correctly. Indeed, it's the key to all Christian relationships. When we submit to one another, we put the other person first, and ourselves last. Submitting to one another means giving up our so-called 'rights.'

We're very strong on our 'rights' these days: human rights, animal rights, parents' rights, children's rights, women's rights, gay rights. Believe it or not, I even found a website belonging to a group calling itself Vegetable Rights Militant Movement.

Well, I don't know, I dare say this is a spoof. But the message is clear: the world tells you that you must stand up for your rights; be assertive; don't let anyone put you down.

That's what the world says. But the Bible says: Submit to one another. Submitting means not insisting on what we see as our rights. Let's read verse 21 again: **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

Do it, Paul says, out of reverence for Christ. We are to do it because Jesus submitted; he submitted to his Father's will and went to the cross to win our forgiveness. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before the mob came to arrest him, Jesus prayed: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

Luke goes on to tell us that Jesus was in anguish, and that ...he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:44) His prayer was that he might be spared this suffering, yet he submitted to his Father.

Paul wrote this: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing… (Philippians 2:5 – 7) Submission is all about having the right attitude, the attitude Jesus had when he submitted to the Father. So, we are to submit to one another out of reverence for him.

Paul then goes on to teach us about what submitting to one another will mean, and especially what it will mean in a Christian family. He talks first to wives, then to husbands and then to parents and children.

Look down with me at verses 22 – 24: **Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.**

Our next heading:

Wives, submit to your husbands

Wow! Many people, Christians included, find this instruction difficult. So, it's vital that we set this teaching in context. Paul is talking here to husbands and wives who are both believers in Christ. Let me quote from Doctor Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who, as you may know, was a Welsh preacher and medical doctor. He said this:

The danger is that we should think of marriage amongst Christians as essentially the same as it is with everybody else, the only difference being that these two people happen to be Christians whereas the others are not. Now if that is still our conception of marriage then we have considered this great paragraph entirely in vain. Christian marriage, the Christian view of marriage, is something that is essentially different from all views. (David Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

In verse 32, Paul says that the marriage relationship between a Christian husband and wife mirrors the relationship between Christ and the church. Verse 32: **This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.** What makes this relationship special is that it's based on a covenant. From the earliest times, the Bible tells us that God made a covenant with the people of Israel. And the relationship between Christ and the church is based on a covenant, not a contract.

On the Coalition for Marriage website, I found a table very helpful in understanding the difference between a covenant and a contract. (I've altered it slightly to make it clearer.) You'll find it in the Notes on the back of the service sheet.

Covenant	Contract
Based on unconditional love between God, a husband and a wife	Based on conditional action and reaction between two people
Sacrificial Action: I'll do it no matter what you do	Reciprocal Transaction: I'll do this, but only if you do that
Based on Mutual Commitment	Based on Mutual Distrust
Seeks to Give	Seeks to Get
For Life	For Now

When we start to see marriage between two Christians as a covenant, then, and not a contract, the Bible's teaching about husbands and wives becomes much less controversial because it places obligations on both people.

Paul makes the obligation to the wife clear in verse 22: wives, submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord. And he repeats this command in verse 24: submit in everything. Let's be clear here: Paul is not talking about status; he is talking about the different roles that husbands and wives have in the family. He wrote this to the church in Galatia: So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26 – 28) We are all children of God through faith in Christ. That's who we are. Whether we're male or female, we are all equally precious in God's sight.

So how do we understand the command for wives to submit to their husbands? Before we tackle that question, let's look at the husband's part in this relationship.

Verses 25 – 33: **Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.**

Our next heading:

Husbands, love your wives

Here's this two-way command in verse 21 again. If wives are called to submit, then husbands are called to love. It's vital that we take this passage as a whole. Don't quote the single phrase in verse 23 "the husband is the head of the wife" in isolation. This passage is not about control, it's about love, and especially the love that a husband should have for his wife. What does this love look like? First:

- It's a costly love

Verse 25: **Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.** Jesus died for the church; that's the sort of sacrificial, costly love that Paul is calling for from husbands. Next:

- It's a cleansing love

By the washing of baptism and by confession of faith, Jesus seeks to make for himself a Church that is cleansed and consecrated. Jesus wants a church that is holy and blameless; to present to his Father a church that is without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. So, husband, your love for your wife should always seek to purify, to build her up. Any love which drags a person down is false; a love which cheapens and coarsens is not real love. Real love always cleanses, always purifies. Next:

- It's a caring love

In v31, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24: **"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."** The Bible says that when we marry, we become one flesh. So we care for one another as we care for our own bodies. There's something very wrong, husband, if you regard your wife, consciously or unconsciously, as simply the one who cooks your meals, washes your clothes, cleans your house and brings up your children. In Paul's day, where women were just chattels, this was revolutionary teaching; and it's still every bit as relevant today. Finally:

- It's a constant love

Husband, when you left your father and your mother to be united with your wife, you became one flesh. You should no more think of separating from her than of tearing your own body apart. In that wonderful verse, verse 32, Paul describes this as a profound mystery. Husband, you are to your wife as Christ is to the Church. Jesus left his Father to become one flesh with his bride, the Church. Can you conceive of Jesus ever abandoning the church? 'Till death us do part' has always been God's plan for marriage.

Of course, we are all aware that marriages do fail, relationships do break down. But God is a God of new beginnings; don't allow failures in your past to drag you down in your future life in Christ. But (and I'm speaking to those who are married now): husband say to your wife,

wife say to your husband: as Jesus loves the Church, so I love you, and I will never, never leave you.

Let me return, then, to the thorny issue of a wife's obligation to submit to her husband. We're talking here about a situation where husband and wife are in disagreement. Well, bearing in mind the command to submit to one another, and what we've just been learning about the command for husbands to love their wives, there will be times when a loving Christian husband will listen to his wife and agree to a course of action that he wouldn't otherwise have chosen. Listen, husbands: we are not always right. But there may also be times – hopefully infrequent – when no loving agreement can be reached, and the husband feels that he must stand firm. At such a time, the wife is to submit to the husband's decision, and he is to bear the responsibility for that decision.

Before we move on, let me say a brief word to those here this morning whose spouse is not a believer. I haven't time to say much more than that you're not forgotten. As a church, we recognise the difficulties that you will sometimes experience in your marriage, and that we will do all we can to support you through those difficult times.

I've spent quite a long time talking about husbands and wives, and now I'll be pretty brief in dealing with two other relationships where we are commanded to submit to one another.

Let's read 6:1 – 4: **Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. " Honour your father and mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – " so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.**

Our next heading:

Parents and Children

If women were treated as mere possessions in Paul's day, then children were in an even more perilous position. The Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves, make them work in the fields, punish them however he liked – even with the death penalty. A new-born child would be placed at the father's feet. If the father stooped and picked it up, it meant he acknowledged the child and wished to keep it. If he turned and walked away, and refused to acknowledge it, the child was quite literally thrown out.

Paul's teaching gives children a status well beyond the attitudes of the day. Again, he has something to say to each side of the relationship. To children, he says, 'Obey your parents'; and he quotes the fifth commandment – the first with a promise that it may go well with you. Nowhere does the Bible teach us that obedience to God's commands guarantees an easy life. But the general principle is clear: God has ordained a structure; he has given us rules. And when we ignore them, things will always eventually go wrong.

To you young people here this morning, if ever you feel that your mum and dad don't understand you, remember that your parents only want what's best for you. You might like to think about what Mark Twain said about this (you know who he is - he wrote the stories about Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.) Mark Twain said this: When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

Paul tells children to obey their parents, and then comes the reciprocal part of his instructions: Fathers, don't exasperate your children. The Bible doesn't tell us anything about Paul's childhood, except that he was brought up as a traditional, orthodox Pharisee. It's possible, then, that his was a strict, austere home. So let me say to parents here this morning: set limits for your children, be godly examples to them, but don't break their spirit. Allow them to grow up, to be their own man, their own woman. Don't try to live out your unfulfilled ambitions through your children. As loving parents, we will always care for our children, we will always be vitally concerned for them; but we must recognise that they are only ours on loan from God. One day we must let them go.

Let's read the last few verses, 5 to 9: **Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.**

Our final heading:

Slaves and masters

One historian reckons that there were about 60 million slaves in the Roman empire – so Paul was writing to a large section of society, and what he had to say was highly relevant. Often slaves were deeply loyal to their master, who treated them as a valued family member. But basically, life was grim; a slave was no better than a beast of burden who happened to be able to talk. Their master literally had the power of life and death over them. If a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with the letter F – fugitivus; at worst, he'd be killed.

Against this background, Paul's revolutionary teaching again emphasises mutual submission and a humble attitude. Slaves are not just to give grudging obedience, but to obey their masters with true sincerity of heart – as if serving the Lord. Let's be clear: the Bible is not condoning slavery here; it is merely reflecting the reality of the situation in Paul's day. And let's not forget the prominent role played by evangelical Christians – notably William Wilberforce – in the abolition of slavery.

Obey your masters, Paul says, but then he goes on: Masters treat your slaves in the same way. This is dynamite! He reminds slave owners that as Christians both they and their servants are willing slaves of Christ Jesus. We're reminded once again that… There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28) To tell a slave-owner that he is one with his slave is utterly revolutionary. But then the Bible is a radical book, often encouraging its readers to be revolutionaries.

Conclusion

Husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters – the message to each group is the same: submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Maybe you feel that you don't fit into any of these groups – well, neither do I. I'm no longer a husband, sad to say; my children all left home thirty years ago, and I certainly don't keep any slaves hidden away in my house! But I love the Lord Jesus, and out of reverence for him, I want to do what the Bible says. And the Bible's message to us all is the same: submit to one another out of reverence for Christ; always be prepared to put the other person first.

Amen.

Let's pray.

Father, help us all, whoever we are, to be loving towards others; to put their needs before our own. Forgive us if we're so busy with our own concerns that we don't have time for anyone else's; if we're so busy talking that we never stop and listen. Thank you for the example given to us by the Lord Jesus who submitted to the will of his Father in heaven. Help us to submit to one another out of reverence for him. Amen.