

“Submit?”

Genesis 1:24-31; Matthew 25:37-40;
Ephesians 5:20 – 6:9

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As we enter into this particular passage, I would like to give some background. I'm going to start back at the beginning. We read a piece out of Genesis where we had a description of God giving humankind life; male and female he created them. Right at the beginning we see that God has given us some differences—to be male and female. Some people suggest as we hear God say, “We want the human to be like us,” there's that sense of the image of God being given. Some people suggest that as we think about who God is in the Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—that there is an internal sociality to God. Part of who God is, is social by nature – Trinitarian. God has given us that same kind of sociality and it's one way we might reflect God's image. We are social. We have been created with differences that we work out together or that we need to be together because of those differences, perhaps. That's not something entirely new. Most people would say that we are social beings is pretty self-evident.

Since I mentioned Plato last time I was up here, I will mention Aristotle this time, because one of the things Aristotle suggested is exactly that: human beings are social animals and as social animals we choose to live together. Again, it seems pretty self-evident. But he goes on to create a philosophy behind that. The people that came after him said, “OK, Aristotle, we are social animals, but how do we do that? How do we live together?” So what they did was create a philosophical school called Stoicism that decided maybe we could figure out some natural way we're supposed to be and we can rationally figure it all out.

The reason I start there is that I think philosophy does things one way—it tries to figure things out on its own. On the other hand what we might call religiosity—although these days the word doesn't have very good connotations—is to have some sense of God's purpose. It's to say we *don't* have to figure it out all on our own. In fact, that's what Ephesians is all about. Ephesians has said you have encountered God, you have encountered the grace and wonder, the love that God has shown, that grace in our lives. Now what does that mean for you? As we go through Ephesians, that's what is being worked out. There are these themes: that we are rooted and grounded in love and there's a unity that we are called to. As we experience the wonder of what the grace of God is like in Jesus Christ, as we experience the wonder of that love, we are changed and we begin to live differently. We live together; there's that oneness he is encouraging.

If we go back farther in Chapter 5, one of the things that it says is we will be good, right and true. If you take a quick look at those words, *good* can be a

general moral goodness, but it ends up having this sense of sharing, of generosity to it. When somebody is generally morally good, we see they end up being more sharing, so the word takes on that connotation. There's a way in which Ephesians is leading us into what is good, to be more generous, to be sharing of our lives.

The next word is *right*. This doesn't mean that we get the better score on every test, right? It's a rightness that is about being in right relationships. That's the background of this word. It's being in right relationships with each other. It's interesting that "good" is about sharing, and "right" is about being in right relationships.

Then there's *true*. Again, I don't think it's that we can mark every question true or false. But there is a sense in that idea of true that we're looking at what's real. We are not just making the world fit into the way we want it to be because that's the way we want it to be, but we are stepping back, looking to see whether it's real or not, whether it's true or whether it's just something the way I or someone else wants it to be. Then it goes on into being not un-wise, but wise. Being able to understand that what we learn, we can actually use in our lives. We can take this and live it out.

So that's where Paul is in Ephesians when we get to verse 21. Verse 21 is the hinge verse. It's an incredible verse. We could read the rest of it without understanding things if we missed that verse. "Be subject to one another in reverence for Christ." If we don't have that verse, it is hard to interpret the rest of it, although even the rest of it has some really interesting things in it. We are going to start there.

What he is talking about is getting into a relationship. I want to suggest that when we get into a relationship, it's like getting onto a teeter-totter, because now you are connected in a way you weren't before. What one side does affects the other. So what we are saying is, when we are subject to one another what happens to one is going to affect the other. How this all works out is fascinating.

Paul starts each of these next three situations with a fairly typical expected response in the time he was living in. Women, be subject to your husbands. That was the way things were. Women weren't able to own property. They were kept secluded, they were subject to their husbands. So the Ephesians would have expected that comment. Children, obey your parents and slaves, obey your masters—again that is expected. If we just stopped there, we would be suggesting that we should be like Greek society. It doesn't stop there, does it?

It starts with the women. Be subject to your husbands like the church is subject to Christ. That's an incredible statement in itself, because what does Christ do? Christ gives up all his power to come to earth to show us the way, to die for us. One of the fascinating things about Christ to me is that there is very little force in that he never forces us to do things. There's always the sense of awesome power there, but he doesn't use that to overpower us. So all of a sudden we have this relationship being compared to a relationship the church has with Christ. Already Paul is changing the way we see this relationship.

As he goes on, generally you wouldn't even have to talk about the husband. He was in charge. Paul talks to wives first, then he gets to the husbands. I think what Paul is doing is saying most people who take time to read this will read it quickly and I won't add to the fodder of "these Christians are bad people." I think he was being a little sneaky, to tell you the truth. Christians were beginning to encounter persecution and so somebody reading through it quickly would see that Paul is talking about the same things they are doing in society. But when you start reading it more carefully, he's telling women it's like a relationship with Christ. Then he goes to men and says your wives are like your own bodies. What does that do? I think it raises the status of the women. She's not just the one who's supposed to take care of you, you are supposed to take care of her. It puts us more into the teeter-totter kind of relationship where there's a balancing.

The other thing I like about this is, who wants to sit on a teeter-totter and balance all day? No, you want to go up and down. Isn't that like life? Sometimes we are really down and it helps to have someone to help lift us up. It helps to have a relationship that helps us up.

It's fascinating here what Paul is doing, changing the nature of these relationships. This is in line with everything he's been saying. We are one in the body, and in relationships, we are one in a particular way that affects each other and we have to begin to make decisions together. We are subject to one another. There is a mutuality that is involved in our relationships.

Again, with the parent-child relationship, traditionally parents are in charge. Back then, did they think about the child? I have heard that historically in some places they didn't think the childhood should even be recognized. But here, Paul is raising the status of the child, saying that they are people. You can provoke them, but don't do that. Care about them. Love them. Bring them up in the right kind of instruction and discipline.

In some ways, I like the last one the best, because he's going on and on about what it's like to be a worker, a slave. I think this is about the employer/employee relationship. He talks about slavery, but we can translate it as the

employer/employee relationship, the person who is working for someone else. He tells the person who is working for someone else, "Do your best. Work hard and serve them well. Work for your employer with enthusiasm." And then he has this really short line. He says, "Masters, do the same." Look at what he's asking the masters to do. If slaves are to serve the master, what are the masters to do if they do the same? Serve the slave. Serve them with enthusiasm.

At the end, if we haven't got it yet, he says that God shows no partiality. He knows that you are in these relationships where you go up and down and that sometimes we may need to help each other out. There are some ways in which there is a joy in the ups and downs that we go through together. In the end, it's not that God loves one side more than the other. God shows no partiality. God loves each of us, male or female. That's how he created us, and he loves us. Master or slave, employer or employee, it doesn't matter to God. God loves us all. He just encourages us to work it out, to realize that we are connected sometimes in particular kinds of relationship that have some ups and downs, and that have some real joys. When we do, we will recognize all the things written about in Ephesians: that we are rooted and grounded in love, that we will begin to know what is good and right and true, and that we will have wisdom and there will be joy and life. Amen.

Gracious God, you know that we don't always understand and can't really figure things out fully. Perhaps that's exactly why you gave us relationships, so that we can help each other with the ups and the downs. Somehow you connect us in ways that fit, that are right, good, and true. Lord, we are thankful that we are not just trying to figure it out all on our own, but that you give us some direction. By the grace you've given us in Christ and the direction he's given us and by the reverence we have for him, we can know that we can live in these relationships of mutuality, subject to one another, living out together the unity we have in Christ, the love that we have been given and the grace that we share. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.