

Love as God loves us - Ephesians 5:25-33

[After Sunday's Gathering I was asked for a copy of my notes to read by somebody who finds reading a better way to absorb information than listening, they also asked if I would upload them to the website for others to read.

If you heard the sermon you'll recognise most of the notes, some sections are written exactly as I spoke, others I added to or said in a different way. These notes are, just that, notes. It so happens that this week I largely stuck to them and in the order they are written, but nonetheless they are my notes and when I come to preach I follow the leading of the Spirit in emphasis, repetition, or in adding or removing material - so they are not a transcript of what I said.

I hope they help you, Neil.]

Last week we looked at how mutual submission is a consequence of being filled with the Spirit. Such a submission is counter cultural in a world where it is dog eat dog and every person for themselves. Mutual submission means that Christians prefer the other, we lay aside our own desires and preferences for the benefit of the other Christians around us. As Christ made himself nothing and submitted himself to become a servant to his body, the Church, so we chose to empty ourselves and submit to each other in mutual loving relationship.

Last week we also thought about the complete change that Jesus brought to the Roman/Greek world, and we looked briefly at how that worked out in the early church. Our main focus was to understand how mutual submission worked, and the revolutionary nature of it for the society of the time. This week I want to spend a bit more time looking at the practical outworking of that in relationships between husband and wives. I'm guessing most of us have either been married, or been children in the care of a married couple - or we all at least know married couples. So we are all invested in this.

As I said last week I know from the questions the church asked before they called me that as I explain this passage there will be some amongst us who disagree with parts of what I say. All I ask is that you listen with an open mind and even if we do not agree on every aspect of the theology of human relationships I am sure that there will be huge chunks you can agree with. I also ask that where we disagree we agree to disagree peaceably and if anybody wants to talk through any of this please let me know. Given the questions you asked me before you called me and the answers I gave then there will be no surprises in what I have to say :)

Let's read today's passage, I'm going to read again from 5:21 as that is the context of this segment, but we will be thinking about v25 onward.

[Read Ephesians 5:21-35]

As I explained last week Paul was writing to a church in a society where power was very unequal. It was very definitely a man's world, even to the point where some aspect of GBV were accepted and expected - using slaves for sexual pleasure, the determination of whether a baby girl would live or not, for example.

If you pause and consider Genesis you realise that this gender imbalance wasn't always there. Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. For humanity to take on the image of God we need both male and female. Men alone don't reveal God nor do women. But something in the combination of male and female does.

You see, despite some theologically awful if otherwise beautiful artwork, there is no hierarchy in God. We worship a triune God who is equally Father, Son and Holy Spirit, transcendent and supernatural.

Tertullian said around 1800 years ago [draw a circle in the air] "For by whom has truth ever been discovered without God? By whom has God ever been found without Christ? By whom has Christ ever been explored with the Holy Spirit? By whom has the Holy Spirit ever been attained without the mysterious gift of faith?" And of course, we know from our Bibles that faith is a gift from God. It is a circular mutually

dependent relationship, not hierarchical. Don't worry, we aren't getting into a sermon on the theology of God, I'm just making the point that God is in perfect relationship with himself, and if God is in perfect relationship with himself and we are made male and female in his image, then male and female ought to be in perfect relationship with each other.

Reading further in Genesis we see how God brought all his creation to the man, who duly named them, but amongst them no suitable helper was found. So God created Eve out of the man, somebody he couldn't reject because she was his flesh, the man even responds by saying "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". Together they represent something of the image of God.

Eve was described as Adam's helper which describes an aspect of their relationship rather than hierarchy, i.e. it doesn't mean Eve was subordinate to Adam. The Hebrew word for helper that is used here is also used elsewhere in the OT to describe God in relationship to man and I don't think any of us would ever say that God was subordinate to man.

Adam and Eve were created equally, one flesh, together bearing the image of God. God assigned each their roles, the man to work the ground, the woman to work relationships. Perfect mutual equality.

Then came the fall and the curse. The consequence was that the man's work on the ground became hard work. For women relationships became hard work. Perfect mutual equality became marred by sin. Wind forward a few years and you find King Xerxes ruling over his pagan empire. He holds a banquet and demands that his wife Queen Vashti attend to show herself off to his guests. She refuses. In his fury at her refusal we find in his response, from the mouth of a pagan king who worshipped false idols, the first law that is designed to ensure that women will obey their husbands. It was a pagan edict, not a command of God. As we work through the pages of the Bible we find the consequences of the sin damaged relationship between men and women spelt out time and again, alongside all the other consequences of sin.

Finally Jesus was born, and into a Jewish family living under Roman occupation. In Roman society the household was the foundation of the state, and the male was the head of the house. His word was, quite literally for his household, law. He could order his new born daughter to be killed. He could treat his slaves as he wished. His wife was for lawful child bearing, but he would often use prostitutes or concubines for his sexual pleasures, or even his slaves or servants. Women looked after the children from birth, but once a boy reached the right age the father would take over his instruction - leaving of course the instruction of any girls to the mother. A man could divorce his wife but the wife could not divorce her husband. Women were regarded as intellectually inferior to men and didn't receive education. They couldn't make contracts or own property. They were considered unreliable as witnesses. They could talk to their husbands, but should never talk to another man unless their husbands were present. Women were kept in separate parts of the house and often didn't eat meals with men. It was a highly unequal and unjust society reflecting the damage sin had done to relationships between men and women. It wasn't the society God intended, it was the sin damaged society that is a result of the fall.

At the start of Jesus' ministry he announces his gospel, his good news, the kingdom of God has come near. Finally, after countless thousands of years the consequences of sin in the garden of Eden begin to be unwound. So it is hardly surprising to find that in the restorative redemptive work of Christ ushering in the kingdom of God things are restored to their pre-fall state, before sin entered the equation. He offers humans access to God's kingdom, restored relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, healing from their diseases, restored relationships with each other, restored relationship with creation.

Jesus demonstrates this through his 3 or 4 years of ministry. He shows the power of the kingdom by raising the dead, healing the sick, removing the consequences of sin from people's lives. He breaks sin damaged societal conventions and teaches women, he appoints them as witnesses to his resurrection.

After his resurrection we find women as well as men leading churches as elders and deacons. It isn't just the Bible that tells us that women were leaders in the early church, Pliny in his letter to Trajan in the early second century wrote about women deacons that he tortured to try and get them to recant their faith in Christ.

So, as Paul sat down to write his letters he was writing in the face of a complete revolution in the church. The societal structures, only men being in charge, were being overturned. Women were being recognised for the gifts the Holy Spirit gave them, rather than being excluded because of gender. The kingdom of God was breaking out in the lives of ordinary Christians. But this was both a joy and a threat, a threat because the liberty of women threatened the social order of the day. So, the question for Paul as he wrote to the churches, as he wrote the passage we are studying today, was how do we live out this kingdom life that Christ gave us when we live in a society whose very foundation rests on households where men have power?

To understand what Paul writes here in Ephesians about marital relationships, you need to consider Paul's other writings. If you read wider you find things that would have been shocking to his patriarchal "men have charge" readers. For example in 1 Corinthians 7 he says that a wife has authority over husband's body - a complete inversion of the practice of society. In fact ten times between v2 and v16 of 1 Cor 7 he is careful to explicitly say about the wife what he says about the husband. There is a mutuality in Paul's writings that was shocking at the time, and until this current generation was often missed by preachers and hence by congregations.

This is what Paul is tackling as he writes to husbands and wives. His plea to wives was to submit to their husbands; in effect your new found freedom in Christ, the breakout of the kingdom of God, has not to be used to overthrow the structure of society. Yes women are now leaders in church. Yes women now preach. Yes you are equal with men in the kingdom of God. But we aren't leading a revolution to overthrow governments.

But having said that, in his next breath he reminds husbands that the power society gave them should be exercised the way that Christ exercised the power he had as God. Don't rule over your wives, don't abuse my instruction to your wife to submit to you because you and her are equal before God, you are one in flesh. In the same way Christ, through whom all things were created who sustains all things, loved the church and gave himself up for her, so husbands, you who society has put in charge, give yourselves in sacrificial submission to your wives in serving them.

It is easy to see that with the power males had in society they had few obligations towards their wives, not much beyond providing food and shelter. What Paul wrote here turns that upside down, the husband is told to put his wife's interests and well being first and to give himself to caring for her. Wrapped up in this is our understanding of the unity of husband and wife expressed in Genesis and again here in v31 - abusing one's wife would be the same as abusing your own body - unthinkable.

So how do we apply this text today?

Whilst we now live in a society that recognises and affirms gender equality, it is sadly still the case that due to strength and aggression of men that they often have advantages and options that are denied to women. Even down to pay female graduates often end up earning up to £8k less than men and it hasn't changed much over recent years. The issue is the same as in Paul's day, abuse of power. And in this world where there is power imbalance Paul is writing to those who have the power and telling them that they should lay their lives down for those that don't to protect them - not because they can't watch out for themselves, but simply because those with power are to follow the example of their saviour.

How about in marriages? Sadly there are bad marriages. 1 in 4 women in the UK suffer from GBV. This passage sharply tells men that they are to treat their wives in the same way as Christ has treated them, becoming a servant and dying for them. In other words their abuse of power is wrong, just because they are more aggressive or stronger gives them no right to force their wills on their wives. Of course the same is true in reverse.

For those in good marriages, what then? If we were a Muslim country where women have few rights and men are in charge then I suspect his advice would remain exactly as it is written in front of us, but we don't live in a Muslim country. The only reason Paul said to women that they were to submit was because society put power in the hands of men, and the reason Paul wrote to men to lay their lives down for their wives was because society laid virtually no responsibilities on men.

Paul opened by affirming the equality of the sexes by talking of mutual submission. Britain today is not a patriarchal society, and as kingdom people we certainly don't want to live patriarchal fallen lives, the lives of a sin ordered society. I believe Paul writing to Britain today would write identical words to both husbands and wives as he would be free to give instructions that reflected the equal relationship before the fall.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Love one another as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Love each other as you love your own bodies, after all, no one ever hated their own body but they feed and care for their body just as Christ does for the church for we are all members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with 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 of you must love each other as you love yourself.

Over the years I've heard all sorts of attempts to interpret Paul differently, and they all fail because whilst they acknowledge the mutuality of submission, they then contradict themselves by trying to say things like the husband has the final say, or the woman should sacrifice career choices so the husband can work, or similar things. This passage or indeed Paul's letters taken together simply do not support that. I believe that Paul no more supported the societal conventions of his day than he would support Muslim societies today or the patriarchal society of our parents. In our equal society both husband and wife should submit to the other, and both should love each other as Christ loved the church.

It isn't a surprise some Christians still struggle with this. It wasn't until 1917 that Constance Coltman was ordained into the Baptist Union, the first woman to be ordained into a mainstream denomination. It took World War 2 for the perception that women were inferior to men to properly shift in society, and a few years later the birth control pill gave women widespread access to higher education and as a result the perception that women were intellectually inferior to men was proven to be wrong. It was only around then, 60 to 70 years ago, that the church more broadly shifted from a belief that women were inferior and incapable to a new theology that said they complemented men. That theology was only born around the end of World War 2, however as I've already summarised a growing majority now believe from the evidence of the Bible and extra-biblical writings like Pliny that the early church was actually egalitarian - in other words gender didn't determine who did what in church life.

We have talked a lot about marriage today, what if you are single and intend to stay that way? There weren't many single people in Paul's day, nothing like the numbers we have today, so it wasn't really a topic he needed to write about. But we can find themes in the text that apply to everybody. For example it counters the misuse of power, the sort of misuse that gives the powerful party an advantage over the less powerful party. So it isn't too hard to see that it is saying that those in positions of power must protect those who are victims of powerful people. For me that meant, in the workplace, standing up for the rights of the most down trodden of our employees who were treated as disposable; they tended to be exclusively women because of the nature of the work. However it speaks equally to women in positions of power telling them not to abuse that power either.

The interesting thing about submission is that it isn't about rights. Mutual submission is love in action, it spills over into defining how we must all behave with each other, not just how families work. Mutual submission does not make us doormats to be used by others, that would be an abuse of power.

Mutual submission requires listening to each other, tolerating each other, teaching and being taught by each other.

In short mutual submission is the mark of all Christians. It doesn't mean we will always all agree with each other. There will be times when we can't submit because the actions or beliefs of the other are unscriptural. But when the issue is not unscriptural behaviour we are called to sacrifice our self and value and promote those Christians around us. Submission is the humility and self-giving love of a saviour who washed his disciples feet, fed them and then endured an agonising death for them and for us.

Just before we close, let me re-read my version of how I believe Paul would phrase this part of his letter if he were living in, and writing to, the church in the UK today. *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Love one another as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Love each other as you*

love your own bodies, after all, no one ever hated their own body but they feed and care for their body just as Christ does for the church for we are all members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with 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 of you must love each other as you love yourself.

As we close this passage for today let's commit ourselves afresh to living the life of our saviour in mutual submission, one to another. In the church, in our marriages, in all our relationships.