



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Be Subject to One Another

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Fr. William Klock

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Yesterday our parish breakfast group discussed C. S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. In the story, Edmund and Lucy make their third visit to the magical land of Narnia, but they also take their cousin, Eustace, with them. And Eustace, he has no framework, no point of reference, no way to understand Narnia. Because Eustace came from a "progressive" family. He addressed his parents by their first names. He read books about factories and granaries, about modern industry and agriculture. The one bit of beauty in his home was a painting of a Narnian ship. His parents couldn't bear it, but it had been a gift and they couldn't get rid of it, so they hung it in a disused bedroom. Eustace couldn't wrap his head around the idea of being in a land of kings and princesses, magic and dragons, and talking animals. All he can do in the first few chapters is scream for the British Consul, compare King Caspian's beautiful dragon ship to modern steamships, and retreat from everyone.

And, I think, if we had to understand God on our own, we'd be a lot like Eustace. We wouldn't have the vocabulary, let alone the vision, to even think about God. When we saw the beauties of his creation, we could do nothing more than reduce it all to physics equations and chemical formulas. And so, Brothers and Sisters, God has spoken. He's given us his word. (Imagine how much better off Eustace would have been had he read the Bible, the greatest of the "right books" he'd neglected.) God speaks, not only so that we can

know him, but so that we can have the vocabulary and the mental—even the *emotional*—framework to begin to understand him. But, most importantly, his word has become incarnate: one of us. And in Jesus we meet and come to know God at our level: A God who knows our life, who is full of patience and love, mercy and grace, a God who is angry at the sin that has disrupted and broken his creation, a God who will justly judge wrong, but who is also humble and loving enough to die to redeem and to set right. In Jesus we meet concretely the God whom the Old Testament describes as King, as Father, as Husband.

And then we realise that these relationships—things like king and father and husband—are relationships we understand, because God has established them as the foundational units of human life and society and particularly so the family: husband and wife, children and parents. And it's in these relationships, even imperfect and damaged by our sins, it's in them that we learn our first vocabulary for understanding and knowing—and trusting—God.

It's no wonder that the devil lies to us about sex, marriage, and family. The devil lies and tells us that sex is about personal gratification, not about mutual self-giving. And we believe the lie and sex becomes selfish. He lies and tells us that men and women are interchangeable, and so we create birth control and try to make women like men by robbing them of the defining feature of feminine biology: the ability to give birth to children. We start seeing God's blessing of children as a negative "consequence" of sex. And we create HR departments staffed by women who try to quash all the things that make men men out of their male employees. And when we believe the lie of interchangeability, men have unnatural relations with men and women with women, undermining and rejecting the very purpose for which God created sex and rejecting his blessing upon us

to be fruitful and to multiply. And if we keep believing the lie, as our culture has, we get ever more absurd, thinking that with surgery and with chemicals and by changing our pronouns, we can turn men into women and women into men. We reject the good story God has written for us, the one in which he's given us the vocabulary of husband and wife, of children and parents, and we write our own lie-based story in which, when confronted with God, we can only think of him as a celestial killjoy out to rob us of our fun, our autonomy, and the carefully crafted identities we've created for ourselves. We start to see God's blessing of fruitfulness as a curse. We start to see the traditional family as an enemy. We're like Eustace, surrounded by goodness and beauty, but only able to see it as threatening and other. And, like the pagans of old, we reinvent God and remake him in our image and using our new vocabulary. Instead of Father, Son, and Spirit we start speaking of him as her and addressing Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer or even Parent (or Mother), Child, and Spirit. Not too far off the mark it seems, but no longer able to be properly known through the relationships, now rejected, that God established precisely so that we can know him and make him known.

And so, Paul writes to the Ephesians in Chapter 4: Put away lies. Instead, speak the truth to each other. Don't be fooled by the dark and foolish ways of the world. God has washed you clean in the blood of Jesus and he has given his Spirit to live in you. He's made you his temple: stewards and priests of his presence, his glory, and his wisdom. A temple that one day, through the power of the gospel and the Spirit, will fill the earth with God's presence and glory. Don't swallow the lies. It's your job, our job, the church's job to confront the world's lies with the truth of God's creation. So put off the old, corrupt, lie-based way of being human and put on the new humanity exemplified by Jesus, risen from the dead and firstborn of

God's new creation. And Paul started by urging us to put away anger and instead to put on patience, kindness, and love. It would be hard for even the most pagan of pagans to argue with that. And then, based on exactly the same principle of living out the truth of God's creation, Paul urged us to put away sexual immorality and greed. And now, without a breath—because in the Greek there's no sentence break, let alone a paragraph break, between Ephesians 5:20 and 5:21, where we ended last week, Paul writes, "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.*" That's 5:21. [Page 1162 in the pew Bibles.]

What does new creation look like? Brothers and Sisters, it looks like Christians being subject to one another. What does God's wisdom—his wise way of ruling creation look like? It looks like his people being subject to one another. He's already told us back in 4:2 to "bear with one another in love, being humble, meek, and patient and making every effort to guard the unity the Spirit has given us. Put away all anger and yelling, sexual immorality and all impurity and greed. In other words, stop using others as your punching bags, as your means of sexual gratification, and as your means of getting rich. Instead, be imitators of God and love each other the way the Messiah loved you and gave himself for you. Jesus' self-giving for our sake on the cross was a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God and if we're going to be his priests and his temple, giving of ourselves to each other will be our sweet-smelling offering to God. And this follows right along with what Paul has said already about our differentiated unity: Jew and gentile, man and woman, slave and free...Canadian and American, white and black, Liberal and Conservative, Coke and Pepsi, Ford and Chevy, and on and on. Different people with different backgrounds, different identities, Paul even stressed different giftings given by God, but all made one through our union with Jesus.

Our unity, maintained by this self-giving of ourselves is the means by which we confront the lies and foolishness and darkness of the world with the truth and wisdom and light of God's new creation. And at this point Paul could write a whole book covering all the situations and relationships in our lives and how this rule of being subject one to another might apply, but he's writing a letter from prison and so he focuses on three areas that were key to the Ephesians. I want to spend most of our time on the first, because it's the most important for us. But before we look at what he says specifically to wives and to husbands, I want to jump to his summary of the whole thing in the end, midway through verse 28. As is so often the case with Paul, it's at the end that he sums everything up and gives us the theology behind it. So look at verse 28 and following: "Someone who loves his wife loves himself. After all, nobody ever hates his own flesh. He feeds it and takes care of it, just as the Messiah does with the church, because we are parts of his body. [Now Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24.] 'That's why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two become one flesh.' The mystery [the hidden meaning] in this is very deep; but I am reading it as referring to the Messiah and the church. Anyway, each one of you must love your wife as you love yourself; and the wife must see that she respects her husband."

So Paul understands marriage in light of the Messiah's relationship with his body, the church. He takes us back to Genesis 2 and God's command that the man will leave his father and mother and become one flesh with his wife. Yes, Paul admits, there are some hard things here, some hidden meanings, but the important and obvious thing is that this is ultimately about the Messiah and the church. There are *two* important take-aways from this.

First, Paul saw Genesis 2 as a prophecy of God's son, leaving his home to find his appointed bride. And once Paul makes this connection, we can see this story weaving its way through the whole Old Testament as the Lord pursues and woos his intended bride in the wilderness, showing his covenant love; as the marriage is ruined through Israel's prostituting herself to other gods as Hosea and Ezekiel describe; as God promises to renew that covenant, betrothing Israel to himself all over again. And so Paul saw Jesus, the bridegroom taking up this role, one laid out for him over the course of the Old Testament. And Paul could look forward to the culmination of the story as we see it in Revelation, in the restoration of all things, heaven and earth, God and man rejoined, all symbolised in the marriage supper of the lamb and his bride.

And the second point Paul sees here: Think of how this fits into the big sweep of Ephesians. In Chapter 1 Paul wrote about God's eternal purpose to bring together everything in heaven and earth in the Messiah. In Chapter 2 Paul explained how this great plan is symbolised in the coming together in the church of Jews and gentiles into a single new humanity and growing into a temple filled with God's Spirit. And in Chapter 3 Paul described this coming together of the two people into one as one of the mysteries of the gospel that confronts the principalities and powers of the present age with the reality of God's victory at the cross and his new creation. Then in Chapter 4 Paul wrote about how this new humanity, the church, is sustained by a diversity of gifts and ministries given by God to help the church grow up in every way into the head, the Messiah himself. And now Paul brings it all to a crescendo with this mystery—the Messiah's own self-giving love as the radical model for the husband's vocation to serve his bride. So this isn't just some one-off, detached, stand-alone advice on marriage. What

Paul says here about marriage is an integral part of the whole thing, the whole story that began with Adam and Eve and runs through God's wooing Israel in the wilderness, and the coming of his son to prepare and to wed his bride. Brothers and Sisters, if you want to understand marriage, look to the relationship between the Messiah and the church. *And* if you want to understand the Messiah and the church, look to the institution of marriage. Think about it: heaven and earth, Jew and gentile, the body building itself up in love—now man and woman brought together in marriage. The mystery is revealed. This is the whole biblical story of God and his people in miniature, revealed in the institution of marriage itself. And that comes with a warning: mess with marriage, tinker with it and you might just lose the whole thing. Like Eustace having no way to relate to Narnia, because he hadn't read the right sort of books. But that's what we seem to do. We listen to the world's foolish lies instead of God's wisdom, we get bogged down in arguments about gender roles, and we end up missing the great vision of God's purposes to set creation and us to rights.

So, now let's back up to the details. Look at 5:22-24: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. The man, you see, is head of the woman, just as the Messiah, too, is head of the church. He is himself the saviour of the body. But, just as the church is subject to the Messiah, in the same way women should be subject in everything to their husbands."

And let's keep going. Paul is nothing if not an equal opportunity offender. Verses 25 and following: "Husbands, love your wives, as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself for it, so that he could make it holy, cleaning it by washing it with water through the word. He did this in order to present the church to himself in brilliant splendour, without a single spot or blemish or anything of the kind, so

that it might be holy and without blame. That's how husbands ought to love their own wives, just as they love their own bodies."

Now, my observation has been that people usually rankle at this because they're well aware that abuse happens. It does. And Paul knew that as well as anyone. In his world there were some powerful and independent women, but the reality for most women was that they often were little more than chattel. They could be exploited, abused, and divorced on a whim. In Greece and Rome, marriages were typically made for social or political reasons and with little if any expectation of love. And this is why verse 21 matters so much. "Be subject to one another," Paul writes. As in his day, so in ours. The answer to abuse of power is not to abandon marriage. The answer is to recover God's original design, to live his new creation, to embrace the transforming power of self-giving love. Paul knew it's not easy. If he felt the need to write this, it's most likely because he knew some of the Ephesian Christians were struggling with this very thing.

And it's not to say that all men are a certain way and that all women are a certain way with no variation, but Paul really leans into our natural wiring as men and women—how God made us in his wisdom. When men look after, care for, and show love to their wives, their wives are more inclined to be subject to their husbands. And, when wives are subject to their husbands, husbands are naturally inclined to respond with that love and care. It's a cycle that feeds itself, but more importantly, it reflects and teaches us something about Jesus and the church. Because Jesus the Messiah has given himself for our sake, showing that he loves us, and showing that he is worthy of our trust, it's both natural and easier for the church to submit to him in a reciprocal love. Notice how Paul holds up marriage as a signpost to God's new creation in the Messiah as the woman subjects herself, not to

the heavy-handed, lording-over of her husband, but to a husband who models the self-giving love of the Messiah who died for his church. And the husband loves his wife in the way the Messiah loved his church. Just as the Messiah has redeemed and purified and is preparing us for God's new world, so the husband should do everything he can to encourage the flourishing of his wife, for her to be glorious creation God intends for her to be. That creates the relationship in which the wife, herself, responds with her own self-giving love. And Paul wraps it all up in the language of redemption—of being presented spotless and pure and holy. And the two becoming one flesh, mirroring the gathering together of Jew and gentile, Ford and Chevy, Coke and Pepsi in the church. Our marriages are swept up and become part of God's renewal of all things. It shouldn't be any wonder that marriage is so often a point of attack by the devil.

But that's not the end of the passage. Paul goes on in 6:1-4, addressing children and fathers. And let me say before we read, that saying something like this to children, in Paul's world, was almost unheard of. Children were not addressed as responsible agents. Consider that in Greek, the words for "child" are neuter, not male or female. It's almost like kids weren't actually people yet. But Paul says to them anyway, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord. This is right and proper. [And now he quotes Exodus 20:12.] 'Honour your father and your mother'—this is the first commandment that comes with a promise attached!—so that things may go well with you and that you may live long life on earth." And then in verse 4 he says, "Fathers, don't make your children angry. Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Paul knew what family life can be like. And if children and parents can get at each other in our world, imagine how bad things might have been in a

world where children were hardly even seen as being real people. Paul knew the danger of parents being harsh with their children and he knew how angry children can get when they're treated unfairly or when parents demean them. So he addresses them. He reminds children of the command and promise God gave to the Israelite children: Honour your parents so it will go well for you in the land"—meaning the promised land. In Greek that word "land" can also mean "earth" and since the gospel opens up that promise beyond Israel itself to the whole earth, I think Paul is now envisioning those children as the next generation of Christians, living out new creation in their own relationships and being the temple that God's Spirit has made them and being the fulfilment of the blessing to be fruitful and fill the earth—not just with themselves, but with the gospel—as stewards of God's presence and wisdom.

But Paul's exhortation to mutual submission also extends to masters and slaves. Look at verses 5-9: "Slaves obey your human masters, with respect and devotion, with the same single-mindedness that you have toward the Messiah. You must get on with your work, not only when someone is watching you, as if you were just trying to please another human being, but as slaves of the Messiah. Do God's will from your heart. Get on with your tasks with a kind and ready spirit as if you were serving the master himself and not human beings. After all, you know that if anyone, slave or free, does something good, they will receive it back from the master.

"Masters, do the same to them. Give up using threats. You know, after all, that the master in heaven is their master and yours, and he is no respecter of persons."

This is another spot where modern people get angry with Paul, because he sounds like he's defending slavery.

He's not. In fact, in Philemon Paul offers a protest against the institution at least within the Christian community. But here's the important thing: Paul was thinking big when he wrote this. Paul was thinking about new creation and in God's new world there will be no slavery. Paul could never put an end to it himself. Slavery was what made the ancient world work. We have machines and engines and robots. The ancient world had slaves. Close to a third of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves. And Paul knew the way out wasn't through rebellion, but through the gospel; the way out was through the church being the church, by putting off the old humanity and living the new humanity in the midst of whatever our current circumstances are, because that's how Jesus the Messiah, his humility, his gracious sacrifice for sinners, his resurrection and life, and God's new creation wisdom make their way into the world. In that sense, slavery was no different an evil than anger, wrath, sexual immorality, or greed. The only way out is for Jesus' people to take up our vocation and to live as God's priests, to be his temple in the midst of a broken world living in foolish darkness and in doing so to confront it all with the life-restoring wisdom of God. To confront the selfishness of the world, with the mutual self-giving love of the cross, lived out in our lives, lived out in whatever situations we find ourselves: in marriage, in divorce, in singleness; as parents and as children; as slaves and as masters. In our world today as employees—often used and abused because of the greed of our employers—and as employers.

Think on that. We've often read this part of Ephesians as if Paul is giving us a doctrine of marriage—or a doctrine of parenting or of slavery. We tend to look at these things as detached from each other. We get bogged down debating gender roles or parenting techniques or even slavery. And we end up missing Paul's point, which is that these aren't stand-alone

doctrines or bits of advice. Brothers and Sisters, this is about the church—about you and I—living out the gospel, about us putting off the old and foolish way of being human and putting on Jesus the Messiah, putting on the new humanity and living out in our relationships the humble, self-giving, and mutual submission of the cross. It's about living gospel lives that put into practise the gospel that we proclaim. It's about living out our future hope of renewal and restoration here and now and in a way that brings Jesus to world around us.

Let's pray our Collect again: O Lord, from whom all good things come: Grant to us, your humble servants, that by your holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by your merciful guidance put them into practice; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*