Ephesians

Lesson 10

One aspect of living in wisdom and being filled by Holy Spirit is mutual submission among believers, which can be summarized as striving to serve others’ needs rather than seeking to advance his/her own selfish desires. Paul exhorts husbands and wives to demonstrate mutual submission in their marriages. He exhorts wives to treat their husbands as a leader, using the church’s relationship with Christ as a model. Conversely Paul exhorts husbands to sacrifice their own desires and agenda to benefit their wives, using Christ’s sacrifices for the church as a model. Paul also exhorts husbands to view whatever benefits their wife as a benefit to themselves.

**Eph. 5:22-33 Christ’s relationship with his followers**

Eph. 5:22-33 has as much to say about Christ’s relationship with the church as it does husbands and wives. In verse 22, Paul reiterates that Christ is the head, or occupies the preeminent position, in the community that is the church. He is also that community’s savior. This is a good example of how in the church a role or position is to be used to benefit others. Christ uses his exalted position to benefit the church by saving it. This is a form of voluntary submission. Verse 23, reiterates that the church should voluntarily submit to Christ, which believers do by worshipping, following, and obeying Christ’s commands. It is easier to follow a leader who uses his position for the benefit of his followers.

In verse 25, Paul explains how husbands are to love their wives, by stating that Christ sacrificially loved the church and handed himself over for the community of believers. The verb “handed himself over” emphasizes that Christ voluntarily chose to die for believers’ sakes, specifically to (1) make the church holy by cleansing it from the defilement of sin; in this context, the terms for “cleansing” and “washing” probably are inspired by the ancient Jewish custom of a pre-wedding bridal bath and are being used figuratively to refer to how Christ’s payment spiritually cleanses believers; the meaning of “the word” is debated, but because it is closely associated with the process of making people holy, the gospel message seems like the best candidate. See Rom. 10:8-10. (2) The second purpose mentioned is so that Christ could present the church in a glorious state, not blemished, wrinkled, or having any other imperfection; this phrase seems inspired by the ancient Jewish custom of a groom going with friends to bride’s house, then bringing the bride to his father’s house to present the bride to the groom’s father for the wedding. Paul, however, says in this passage that Christ presents the church to himself. When does this presentation occur? Revelation uses similar imagery in association with Christ’s return to earth, although there the bride’s own preparation is mentioned. (Rev. 19:6-10.) Paul could be referring to how Christ’s sacrifice enables believers to be presented to Christ in a glorified state when Christ returns to earth. (3) make the church holy and blameless; this phrase refers to moral perfection, and its similarity to the first point reminds the reader that any references to the bride’s physical appearance are merely figurative, intended to help convey the central point that Christ voluntarily chose to die, not for his own benefit, but to transform believers into a morally perfect community, spiritually fit to dwell with each other and Christ in eternity.

In verse 29, Paul exhorts husbands based on the principle that Christ feeds and cares for the church as though we were his body and in verse 30 asserts that believers are members of Christ’s body. Paul does not explain in this passage what Christ does to sustain the church. Earlier Paul said that Christ distributes spiritual gifts and assigns ministries to help all believers become spiritually mature. (Eph. 4:7-16.) Christ provides strength for ministry. (John 15:5; Col. 1:29.) He intercedes for believers with God the Father, including asking the Father to send the Holy Spirit to minister to believers. (John 14:16, 26; 16:7; Rom. 9:34.) And, ultimately, Christ gives his followers eternal life and enables them to reign with him. (John 10:28; 17:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4-5.) A good leader empowers his followers to succeed, and is not threatened by their success. Christ demonstrates this principle better than anyone else.

In verse 32, Paul follows a reference to Gen. 2:24, about a husband and wife becoming one body, by applying this “great mystery” to Christ and the church. It’s a complicated way of noting the mysterious and remarkable nature of the union between Christ and believers. (1 Cor. 6:17; Acts 9:4.) This is the capstone of Paul’s argument based on the church being Christ’s body. If believers are united in spirit with Christ, we can trust Christ to act in our best interests because that means Christ is furthering his own interests when he helps us.

**Eph. 6:1-4 Children and parents**

Paul next addresses children and parents, beginning with children. The word for “children” implies a close and dependent relationship between the child and parent, which would probably be a child older than an infant or toddler, but not an adult. Paul exhorts these children to “obey” their parents (plural). Obey means do as told. The verb obey is modified by the phrase “in the Lord,” referring to Christ, indicating the children should view obedience to their parents as a responsibility to Christ. Paul argues such obedience is “right” based on the OT commandment. Paul is most likely quoting the LXX version of Ex. 20:12 and/or Deut. 5:16. Paul’s use of this command shows that, even though Paul believes Christians have died to the law, the law contains useful moral guidance. Paul treats “honoring” as equivalent to “obeying.” Paul implies that the fifth commandment is the first one with a promise attached to it. This troubles some people who view the language in Ex. 20:5-6 as a promise attached to the second commandment. That does not seem like a problem to me. The verses following the second commandment strike me as a statement by God about His character rather than a “promise” of a benefit associated with following that particular commandment. A more difficult question is whether, by quoting these verses, Paul means that the promise applies to NT believers, including gentile believers. Paul does not expressly address this issue. Some commentators think that Paul means the promise still applies. Some of those commentators, however, suggest that it is just a general principle, based on their belief that some generally obedient believers do not experience a long life on this earth. I have trouble accepting either idea because (1) neither version of that idea is not expressly stated; (2) elsewhere Paul indicates that the law does not govern NT believers (Rom. 7:6; Gal. 3:25); (3) elsewhere Paul encourages believers to live as though their time on this earth will be short due to the temporary nature of this age/life, (1 Cor. 7:29-31), so it is hard to believe he would view an OT promise of longevity as an good incentive for obedience; and (4) Paul and Jesus generally seem to anticipate hardship for NT believers in this lifetime, not longevity (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 2:3.) In any event, Paul’s main point is that children should obey their parents and view doing so as a duty to Christ because it is the right thing to do.

Turning to the parents, Paul focuses his exhortation on fathers. In Roman culture, the father was the family member with the authority and responsibility to discipline and provide for children. With sons and unmarried daughters, this authority continued even when they became adults. But I think it unlikely that Paul is just relying on Roman custom. All elements of this section are related to Christ. It seems more likely that Paul directs the exhortation to fathers because Paul believes fathers’ role as leaders in the family carries front-line accountability and responsibility. Paul contrasts two ideas. The first is not to “exasperate” children. It could be translated “provoke” or “make angry.” Comparison with Col. 3:21 indicates Paul is talking about a repeated practice that leads to discouragement and bitterness. Instead, fathers are to educate their children and train their children as servants of Christ. Parents thus must find the balance between discipling their children and not being so stern, strict, and/or demanding that children become discouraged and bitter. Of course, parents do not control their children’s reactions, and I am sure Paul knew that, so all parents can do is strive to act in ways that are likely to produce godliness and not to cause bitterness.

**Eph. 6:5-9 Slaves and masters**

The third fundamental relationship addressed is slaves and masters. Slavery in the Roman empire was not racial. People typically fell into slavery as a consequence of military defeat or economic hardship. Roman law considered slaves to be persons, albeit with limited rights and the risk of being abused. On the other hand, slaves of wealthy households might have better living conditions than poor freedmen and could hope to accumulate assets and purchase their freedom, so entering slavery was sometimes a calculated economic strategy similar to modern bankruptcy. Slaves performed all types of work; they were not limited to manual labor.

Paul exhorts slaves to “obey” their “fleshly masters” with “fear and trembling.” As with children, “obey” means to do as told or to follow instructions. The qualifier “fleshly” foreshadows Paul’s comment that both slaves and human master are subject to God. “Fear and trembling” means a great amount of fear. This was sound advice, in light of the significant authority Roman masters possessed. More surprisingly, Paul also said to obey with “singleness of heart as to Christ” and “not according to eye-service as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ doing the will of God wholeheartedly.” Both phrases exhort slaves to carry out their assigned tasks whole-heartedly rather than just-getting-by, and the rationale is to view their performance as serving Christ’s purposes. This suggests that, even though God views humans as fundamentally equal, God’s plan may include a believer being enslaved, as Joseph was in the OT. But Paul also assures that this type of attitude would be blessed by the Lord, who will reward all good, whether done by slaves or freedmen. In other words, believers should be more concerned with pleasing their heavenly father and the eternal rewards He provides, than with their earthly social status. (Luke 16:1-13; James 1:9-11.)

Paul turns to masters and exhorts them: “do the same things to them, stop threatening them.” It is interesting that Paul views a master’s duty to a slave as involving the same principle as a slave’s duty to the master. Although Paul does not spell this out here, I think Paul probably means that masters should base their treatment of slaves on the knowledge that the slave belongs to God, and God will hold the master accountable for his treatment. One concrete example is not to threaten slaves. This likely refers to trying to squeeze more work by threatening physical harm. In Colossians, Paul exhorts masters to treat slaves justly and fairly. (Col. 4:1.) The motive is that Christ—unlike many ancient authorities--will show no favoritism to the wealthy when he administers eternal judgment. (James 5:1-6.)

Why didn’t Paul advocate for the abolition of slavery? (1) The Roman empire was not a democracy; advocating for this type of social change does not appear to have been an option; (2) The NT apostles were more concerned about recruiting citizens of Christ’s kingdom than trying to reform secular government or secular social institutions (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 7:17-24); and (3) the apostles viewed a person’s status as redeemed from slavery to sin and a servant of Christ as more important than any earthly social position (1 Cor. 7:22) That being said, Paul encouraged believers to try to avoid becoming slaves (1 Cor. 7:23), and, if already a slave, to obtain their freedom if feasible (1 Cor. 7:21); conversely, he expected masters to recognize that slaves were equally human in God’s eyes and occupied the same spiritual status in Christ. (1 Cor. 7:22; Gal. 3:28.) It should not be surprising, then, that Paul exhorted believing Roman masters not to abuse slaves and instead to reward them fairly. (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:4.)

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|  |  | | **Jesus Christ**  Head over creation  Eph. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:24-28 |  |  | | |
|  |  | All believers—Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, or female, are united in Christ and equally covenant heirs through Christ, Gal. 3:26-29 | | | |  |  |
| Wives | Submit to husband like church submits to Christ, Eph. 5:22-24, Col. 3:18 | |  | Husbands | Love wife sacrificially like Christs sacrifices and cares for church, Eph. 5:25-33, Col. 3:19 | | |
| Children | Obey parent in the Lord, Eph. 6:1-2, Col. 3:20 | |  | Fathers | Disciple children in the Lord; Eph. 6:4, Col 3:21 | | |
| Slaves | Obey master as though serving Christ, Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 3:22-24 | |  | Masters | Be fair to slaves because God judges masters, Eph. 6:9, Col. 4:1 | | |
| Citizens | Believers should submit to secular governing authorities as though ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-2 | |  | Governors | Govern justly recognizing that you are God’s servant for that purpose (Rom. 13:4) | | |

Humans have an essential equality as creatures made in God’s image, and believers have an additional equality of status as covenant heirs in Christ, but there are still social roles that involve either submission (which is a form of sacrifice) or sacrifice (which is a form of submission). The trinity provides a model involving equality of nature and distinct roles including submission. B

The fall makes all human relationships involving leadership/submission problematic, even though God has ordained the foundational human institutions of families and government (Rom. 13:1; Gen. 9:5-6.)

--leaders are self-centered, ignore God’s will, make poor decisions even when well-intentioned, and often fail to sacrificially love the people in their care;

--followers have their issues as well; they can also be self-centered, ignore God’s will, and challenge even good leadership decisions;

--God knows all that and still asks believers to fulfill social roles in this lifetime with an attitude of sacrificial love as part of following Christ; believers should strive to be great at any social role they have, including citizens, secular leaders, employees, employers, husbands, wives, mothers, and children; Christ promises to reward his followers for the good they do in this difficult social environment (Eph. 6:7-8; Col. 3:23-24.) For believers in any of these leadership roles, this means viewing leadership as a responsibility and service obligation, rather than a privilege or an opportunity to further one’s own interest.

--the instances where believers should obey God rather than human authorities exist but are exceptions (Acts 4:19-20).

Authority derives from trust, not power.

--in what sense is this statement inaccurate?

--in what sense is it true?

--how does it impact our behavior in various social roles?

What social roles will exist in the new heavens and earth?

--Jesus implies marriage will not exist

--It seems logical to assume childrearing will not be necessary

--God will rule; will there still be instances of leadership/submission among humans?

--If humans were sinless, leadership and submission among humans should function like the trinity;