

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 30, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO (6)**

**Colossians 3:18-4:1**

The attire of a Christ-like character, which includes such graces as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, peace, thankfulness, a devotion to the Word and worship of God, and, above all, love, is to be worn at all times. You are never to leave home without it. Any of it. Nor should you ever be at home without it. Whatever you do and wherever you go, as a member of God's family, set apart and dearly loved by Him, you are to clothe yourself with the qualities that reflect the character of our Savior and King.

This includes our relationships in the family, in the church, and at work. Specifically, Paul wants us to see how these qualities get worked out in the relationships between wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters (or, in our case, employees and employers).

Today's reading from Colossians (3:18-4:1) is a condensed version of what Paul says in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. So I want you to hear what he says there as we consider God's design for marriage, family life, and work.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as 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 Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

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 the 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 his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, 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 – a *mega musterion* – 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.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘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.

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 favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good you do, whether you 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 favoritism with Him.”

It is basically the same teaching we have in Colossians, only expanded. Returning to Colossians, I want you to hear this passage in the voice of *The Message* paraphrase:

“Wives, understand and support your husbands by submitting to them in ways that honor the Master.

Husbands, go all out in love for your wives.

Children, do what your parents tell you. This delights the Master no end.

Parents, don’t come down too hard on your children or you’ll crush their spirits.

Servants, do what you’re told by your earthly masters. And don’t just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you’ll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind that the ultimate Master you’re serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being Christian doesn’t cover up (i.e., excuse) bad work.

And masters, treat your servants considerately. Be fair with them. Don’t forget for a minute that you, too, serve a Master – God in heaven.”

In both Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5, Paul begins with wives and husbands. He starts with the marriage relationship. But in Ephesians 5, what he says about the relationship between husbands and wives – what he says about all the relationships that make up life as we live it – is grounded explicitly in the principle of mutual submission. What precedes and undergirds what the apostle says in Ephesians 5 and 6 is the all-encompassing command to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). *Mutual submission*. Motivated by *reverence for*, yieldedness and devotion to *Christ*. You cannot fulfill God’s purpose for your life without it. Nor can I.

Submission is not a popular word. It is certainly not a popular idea. It is an offensive word to many. The desire to be autonomous – a law unto yourself – can be seen almost everywhere you look. People want to be free from all restraint, from any and all authority that would limit their freedom to do what they want, or to define right and wrong for themselves. We insist on our rights, sometimes for good purposes, sometimes not.

It seems to me that a willingness to voluntarily, graciously submit to one another, and to those in authority over us, is essential to the health of our social contract as a democratic society. We can’t survive long without it.

Submission is an especially unpopular word in our contemporary view of marriage. But this is due to a wrong, inaccurate, unbiblical understanding of what marriage is intended to be and of the meaning of submission.

Before we get into what Paul says specifically to wives and husbands, we should note first that, in talking about marriage, Paul is talking to and about wives and husbands. He is talking about a covenantal relationship, ordained and blessed by God, between a man and a woman. I don't say this meanly. I don't say it with anger. I don't say it harshly. I don't say it to demean anyone. I hope it doesn't come across that way. I say it with love. I say it with compassion. But I say it with conviction and without compromise. God's design for marriage is the union of one man and one woman in a covenantal relationship of exclusive love and fidelity "till death do us part." Nowhere does God give His approval or blessing to the "marriage" of two men or two women. Our culture may approve of it. But God does not. And we must take our direction from Him. We must love people who believe differently than we do. Like Jesus does. We must love people who are in relationships that dishonor God. We must treat them with dignity and respect. We must. But we are not free, under God, to bless, approve, or celebrate what God does not.

With that, let's look at what Paul says to wives and husbands. In both Colossians and Ephesians, he begins with wives.

In Colossians: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (3:18).

In Ephesians: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (5:22).

What Paul seems to be saying – *is* saying, in fact – is that a wife's willing submission to her husband is one aspect of her willing submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. Her husband is *not* her Savior; Jesus is. Her husband is *not* her Sovereign; Jesus is. But one way for her to live out her willing submission to the sovereign and gracious rule of the Lord Jesus is by her willing submission to the loving leadership of her husband.

Submission does not mean inferiority. It does not mean the wife is inferior to her husband. Any man who is married or has ever been married knows that ☺. It does not mean the wife is spiritually or mentally inferior. It does not mean the wife is less gifted or worth less than her husband. A wife's submission to her husband does not give him a license to boss her around, to treat her with contempt, or to mistreat her in any way. Submission is not slavery. That is not what submission in the Bible is about.

For most of us, submission has a connotation of weakness. In reality, biblical submission is exactly the opposite. It takes strength to willingly submit to another, to set aside your own desires and defer to the desires or authority of another person, whether in marriage or any other relationship.

Husbands and wives, men and women: We are all under the same injunction to submit to one another, as an expression of our reverence and love for Christ.

For wives, the command is to “submit to your husbands.” It is *not* an absolute command. It is *not* unlimited in its scope. If your husband asks or orders or compels you to do something that goes against God’s Word and will, you have no obligation to submit to him. In fact, you have an obligation, under God, to refuse to do it. Just in case there is any doubt, there is never any justification for a husband to abuse his wife in any way (or for her to abuse him). Any wife who is endangered physically or emotionally by an abusing husband has not only the freedom but the moral obligation to separate and get away from her husband. If you are in an abusive marriage, or any kind of abusive relationship, you don’t have to stay. You need to get to a place where you can be safe. And your children, too.

Understanding the meaning of submission and working it out is not an easy thing. Author Jill Briscoe points out that first-century wives were already in submission to their husbands involuntarily. The wife’s submission and the husband’s authority were woven into the fabric of ancient culture. Why then, she asks, since they were already in submission to their husbands, did Paul tell wives to submit? “The clue,” she says, “is in the grammar. The [Greek] verb ‘submit’ [*hupotasso*] is in the middle voice. Literally, it means ‘place yourself in submission.’ It means”, she say, to “sit down on the inside as well as the outside. You’ve been sitting down on the outside because you had no choice. Now [in Christ] we give you this voluntary choice, this act of will rather than this legal requirement. Paul was after a heart attitude, a spirit of humility by choice, not coercion. Paul,” she says, “is pro-choice where women are concerned” in this respect: “the choice to lay down our lives for our brothers, sisters, husbands, and children, because we have laid it down for Christ.”

To quote Richard Foster: “(Paul) made decision makers out of those who were [before that time] forbidden to make decisions.”

Biblical submission – the submission of a wife to her husband – is a willing, voluntary choice to yield to the leadership of the husband.

Wives, this isn’t easy, is it? It may sound impossible to you in your marriage. And even if it is possible, it may not sound desirable. But that, I think, is because we only have part of the picture.

Andy Stanley tells of being in a wedding years ago here in DC. He was hanging out with several members of the wedding party when one of the women said to him: “Andy, I heard a preacher say that the man had to be the head of the home because a two-headed home is like a two-headed monster. Is that what you believe? That the man is the head?”

Stanley said to her: “Before I answer your question, imagine you’re married to a man who genuinely believes you are the most fantastic person on the planet. He’s crazy about you. You have no doubt that your happiness is his top priority. He listens when you talk. He honors you in public. To use an old fashioned term, he ‘cherishes’ you. He’s not afraid to make a decision. He values your opinions. He leads, but he listens. He’s responsible. He’s not argumentative. You have no doubt that he would give his life for you if the need arose. You never worry about him being unfaithful. In fact, to quote an old Flamingos song, ‘he only has eyes for you.’”

When he finished, he paused and then asked: “Would you have any trouble following a man like that?” The woman sitting next to him blurted out: “Well, he\*\* no! I want to meet that guy.” Everybody at the table laughed. But she had made his point.

“It’s easy, perhaps natural, to submit to someone who genuinely has your best interest in mind. There’s no fear. No reason to resist. Conversely, anyone who has your best interest in mind has in effect submitted to you. That person has chosen to leverage him- or herself for your benefit, basically saying: ‘You first.’ “ (Andy Stanley, *The New Rules of Love, Sex, and Dating*, 41-42)

Husbands, it’s up to you – it’s up to *us* – to make it easy for our wives to submit to our leadership in marriage and the home. The wife’s duty under God to submit to her husband may seem like a huge undertaking – and it is, especially given the inclination of our hearts to mutual selfishness instead of mutual submission. But, in Ephesians 5 at least, Paul spends much more time talking to husbands about their role than he does to wives.

Husbands, your job – your mission – is to love your wife. It is a very specific kind of love that Paul has in mind here. The word is *agape* – the distinctive New Testament word that describes God’s love for us, and the kind of love with which we are to love one another. The husband is to love his wife, Paul says, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).

How did Jesus love the church? How did Jesus demonstrate His love for us? Sacrificially. He did it by bearing our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). By holding back nothing. By giving everything, As it says in *The Message*: “He didn’t love [us] in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us” (Ephesians 5:2).

Men, this is how we are to love our wives. This is how you are to love your wife. This is how I am to love Mary Sue. We are to love our wives in such a way that it will never be hard for them to submit graciously, happily, to our loving leadership.

As usual, there is more to say about this, but I need to wrap it up for today. My brother Gary, the historian/ author, is writing a book on the religious life of Winston Churchill to be published in 2021. I don’t know if this story will be in it (probably not). Late in life, Churchill attended a formal banquet in London at which the dignitaries in attendance were asked: “If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?” When it was his turn to answer, Churchill rose from his seat and said: “If I could not be who I am, I would most like to be” – here he paused to take the hand of his wife Clementine – “Lady Churchill’s second husband” (James Hume, *Churchill, Speaker of the Century*, 291, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 187). Like the rest of us, I’m sure the Churchills’ marriage was far from perfect. But these are the words of a man who must have loved and cherished his wife.

Whatever you do, submit to one another out of reverence and love for Christ. Wives, whatever you do, submit willingly to the leadership of your husband. Husbands, whatever you do, be worthy of your wife's submission by loving her as Jesus loved the church.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.