



DIRTY WORD SUBMISSION

“Submission” is one of those words you do not mention in polite society. It is certainly not a politically correct word in today’s culture. Indeed, it belongs to that class of emotive nouns (along with “racism” and “dogmatism”) which makes us uncomfortable.

The problem is that submission is a basic concept in Christian living. The willingness to yield to the good of others, to consider others better than ourselves, to serve and seek the good of someone else is central to the Christian walk. There can be no such thing as Christianity or the Church without a commitment to submission.

Paul has been talking about this ugly word throughout the book of Ephesians. The Christian story begins with God submitting himself to us in Christ. As Christians, we must learn to submit to God – in obedience – and to each other – in forgiveness and love.

Yet, it is not until the fifth chapter (vs 21) that Paul actually uses this appalling word. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” There it is. Blatant, bald, and bold. Some people have no shame. Paul – at least when it comes to the topic of submission – appears to be one of them.

What makes this particularly galling is that Paul speaks of submission in the context of ordinary relationships: marriages, families, workplace. This is hard teaching – confrontive, antagonistic to our culture and ourselves, fraught with exceptions and special cases. Yet Paul knows that until we learn submission, we cannot become holy. And unless we become holy, we cannot walk worthy of our calling.

*Submit to one another out of
reverence for Christ.
Wives, submit to your
husbands as to the Lord. . . .
Husbands, love your wives as
Christ loved the church. . . .
Children, obey your parents. . . .
Fathers, do not exasperate
your children. . . .
Slaves, obey your earthly
masters. . . . And masters,
treat your slaves
in the same way.
Eph 5:21-22, 25;
6:1, 4, 5, 9.*

THINK ABOUT IT:

- ♦ Submission is thought to be an old fashioned word, like “thee” and “thou,” which is passing from common usage. The word may be old fashioned, but not the concept. At least not for the Christian.
- ♦ “Submission” may be a culturally heretical word because it strikes at the one religion our culture believes in – the cult of self.



**LET THE CHURCH
BE THE CHURCH**

SERMON 27

- *“Greatness” in God’s kingdom is rarely measured by the things which seem so significant to us. A woman who is patient with her husband and cares for her children and works hard for her employer may know more of holiness than a preacher with vast audiences and hundreds of baptisms.*
- *How we treat people has always been a measure of our closeness to God. Where our tendency is to evaluate our doctrinal stances or moral actions when the question of holiness is raised, God is more likely to look at the quality of our relationships. How we treat people in the home, at the workplace, and in the church is the best and truest litmus test of our rightness with God.*

When Paul says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,” he intends to say something foundational about Christian living. He’s already said that to “walk worthy of our calling” we need to walk in unity. He has just discussed the importance of walking in holiness. Now he turns to a final subject for worthy living: the need to walk in submission.

He begins with a fundamental assumption: Christians *will* submit to others because they honor the example of Jesus. And where better to demonstrate that spirit than where we live and work? “Submit in your marriages,” Paul teaches. “Submit as parents and children. Submit as slaves and slave owners.”

In Christ, submission isn’t about role — “When you are the underdog, submit.” No. Submission transcends role for the Christian. Husbands should submit to wives, parents to children, slave-owners to slaves.

Especially in roles where society has given power — husbands, parents, slave owners — the Christian must take extra care with the call to submit. Power is often about getting one’s own way. Submission is about seeking the good of others. The two are not often compatible. Where society insists, “You call the shots;” Christ insists, “No, I call the shots. And my command is for you to submit to others.”

Over the centuries, these verses have been used as a cudgel to enforce the submission of wives, children and slaves, while husbands, fathers, and slave owners have not been made to feel equally the weight of “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Such a use of this passage contradicts the very reason for which it was written.

Those who find themselves in powerless positions rarely need admonitions to submit — they have little choice. It is those in roles of power who most need the reminder that they also must submit. The God of creation submitted himself for us. If he could do that, not because he *had* to but because he loved us so, could we not do the same?

Paul wants Christians in all roles to submit — above and beyond what culture *requires* for some of us and in spite of what culture *allows* to others — precisely because Christians lay down their lives for people. It is the nature of the beast.





SUBMISSION: A DIRTY WORD

Small Group Member's Guide

ICE BREAKER

Words are constantly in a state of flux. Especially today, the speed with which words acquire new meanings is staggering. Share some words that have changed meaning for you recently. For instance, do you remember when *rush* meant simply *hurry*. It then came to mean a *surge of feeling*. And now seems to refer to a certain portly *political commentator*.

THE WAY OF SUBMISSION

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church. . . . Children, obey your parents. . . . Fathers, do not exasperate your children. . . .

Slaves, obey your earthly masters. . . . Masters, treat your slaves in the same way.

*Ephesians 5:21-22, 25;
6:1,4,5,9.*

PC! An ugly acronym for an ugly idea—Politically Correct! Short people are not *short*, they are *vertically challenged*. The handicapped are *differently enabled*. The *poor* are *financially challenged*. The head of the meeting is not the *chairman*, but the *chairperson*. Is that metal thing in the street, I wonder, still called a *manhole cover*?

In much of our culture today some words have become so politically incorrect that they dare not be used at all. One hesitates to say *queer* even if simply describing something out of the ordinary. Did you know there was a time when *laborer* wasn't a synonym for unskilled and *Yankee* wasn't an epithet and showing *respect* to our leaders was always expected.

Though, as Christians, we may like to think we're the ones who do the influencing, the truth is we are also greatly influenced by the changes in our culture. At times, such changes may lead us to greater understanding—it was not the church that led the fight against slavery. But at other times, the world's influence can be terribly destructive to Christian character. Such is the case with the idea of *submission*.

Submission is not PC! It has become an ugly word with all sorts of ugly connotations. At best it is thought of as outdated. And at worst it is thought to be beneath our dignity—perhaps even ungodly.



**LET THE CHURCH
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Why is submission such a dirty word in our world? Perhaps because authority has so often been misused. Some—including Christian husbands—have taken submission and used it as a cudgel to beat down another's will. And, of course, we are the *Land of the Free*. Americans may prize nothing as much as freedom and independence. We bow the knee to no one. To be submissive is practically un-American. But most fundamentally, submission strikes at the heart of the cult-of-self. When we have elevated our own self-interest to be the premier good, submission to another becomes most illogical.

Yet submission—willingly, voluntarily, joyfully given—is absolutely foundational to all that is Christian. Was it not a great act of submission for God to send us His son? Did Jesus not voluntarily submit His entire earthly life to our good? Is He not still doing the same today? Jesus' words, "Father, not my will, but yours be done" characterize His ultimate submission. And these same words and attitude have become the model for all Christians.

From 5:21 through 6:9, Paul addresses different relationships and shows how each is to be mutually submissive. All that he says to husbands and wives, children and parents, and masters and slaves is summed up in his opening statement: *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Yet the truth is the entire Ephesian letter is one long paean to the triumph of loving submission. In chapter 1 Paul shows us how God has been submitting Himself to us—God has foregone His right to vent his anger on us and has freely forgiven us in Jesus. In chapter 2 Jesus is shown submitting not only to the will of God but to our needs. For our sake He has *abolished in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations*, thus becoming *our peace*. In chapter 3 we see how Paul joyfully submitted to the gospel call and his commission to the Gentiles. In chapter 4 Paul begins his exhortation to holiness by showing the necessity of maintaining unity through mutual submission.

For Paul, personal holiness and loving submission are inextricably linked. One cannot be holy before God without submitting oneself to the will of the Father. One cannot hope to be righteous without submitting to the Lordship of Christ.

Further, one must not think of holiness as a matter simply of personal purity. Holiness has much to do with how we treat one another. And the hallmark of Christian relationships is a joyful, willing, submission to the good of others. Which is, of course, our imitation of God's loving submission to us.

To Discuss

- ♦ Do you agree that "submission" has become at best unfashionable? Why do you think this has occurred? What would you ^{cite} as the contributing causes to our modern hostility toward submission?
- ♦ What are the consequences to us as a society of a general unwillingness to submit to other's needs and rights? What are the consequences for the church as this attitude changes the way we interact with each other?
- ♦ The concept of submitting to one in authority is easy to understand—if not always to do. But how is mutual submission supposed to work? How will decisions be made? How can leaders lead, if they too must be submissive?
- ♦ Husbands have often made much of Paul's injunction to wives to submit. But that is not all Paul had to say on this relationship. How does he show that husbands too are to be submissive to their wife's needs?

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