

All Saints Talk for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February 2025

**Respect one another** Paddy Gleave

*Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9* Mutual submission

I became a Christian on a CPAS camp in Devon. I later went on the CPAS Broads Cruise. My faith was shaped by those places – it was straightforward – Jesus was compelling and I had lots of fun.

At university I encountered a different take on Christianity. It seemed important to have a view about issues such as infant baptism, or whether a female could be president of the Christian Union – bewildering. It came to a head when I was walking with a girl from the CU over the hills from the uni to Lancaster. She said she couldn't wait to submit to her husband. I was astonished, and today I am speaking on one of those dynamite passages.

We've been looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. You can still go and see some of the ruined structures to this day.

We're coming to the end of this beautiful letter. Up to this point the letter has explored the gospel story, and how God formed a new multi-ethnic, unified human community in Jesus. Through grace and forgiveness humans were given a new fresh purpose and tasks. The letter explores a practical response to this. We all have different gifts. We put on new clothes with different ways of living – forgiving, truthful, peaceful, not seeking gratification.

And now we get to a weird bit of the letter. Let's be honest, this is strange and brings into sharp focus that the New Testament is from a very different time and culture from us - the first century Imperial Roman Empire – this part of the letter talks about women submitting, slaves obeying...

Let's go back a few passages. Paul has talked about being filled with the Spirit – vital for a Christian. Singing, giving thanks to God and submitting to each other as we live together in Christ as one.

The passage today is directly connected with this – the flow of thought here is all connected. The word *submit* is awkward. In our culture, the sovereign self is paramount, and freedom is conceptualised as doing whatever I want to do. The rise of expressive individualism sees people demonstrate their sovereign self by pro-actively expressing their individualism. Submission to another directly confronts this worldview – it seems weak, yielding to the will of another or even being a doormat!

The Greek word is *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω) – the idea is 'putting your rank below someone else'. Here is a clip for the Lord of the Rings film – The Return Of The King...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9VWhHJaSjA>

In the story, Aragorn has returned after many trials to become the true King. He is sacrificial, wise and kind. The hobbits – the small folk with no power or influence have through their good heart saved everyone by destroying the evil Ring of Power.

So, this is what the word means – it's not hierarchical. Paul is not saying a husband has authority over his wife in a one-way sense. In Roman society, households were ruled by the husband. It was autocratic. Husbands were often distant from their wives and could treat them however they liked. So, consider the effect of the Gospel - all are one in Christ, barriers broken down, freedom, redemption. The temptation for men was, notwithstanding this, to stick to the cultural setup which benefited them. For women, the emancipation may well have led some to push against the cultural setup. This tension may well have caused a stir to non-Christians seeing the way of things being challenged.

The passage goes on to give a reason for wives submitting. Paul talks about the man being the head of the wife as Jesus is the head of the church. The word "head" again is difficult – it puts into our mind ideas like "headteacher", "headquarters" – so, an authority structure. Was that the meaning Paul intended? For me the most compelling meaning from biblical scholars is 'source of life and nourishment.' So, what was Paul on about?

Paraphrasing the theologian Tim Mackie, it's important when reading the Bible to keep the beginning nearby. Genesis sets up the biblical storyline, and this storyline is always close to the minds of biblical writers. In the Creation story, everything is described as *tov* (טוב) – that is, "good". Save one thing – the man is alone. He cannot take forward his purpose to rule creation wisely, and bring out its potential in partnership with God. He needs an *ezer* (עֵזֶר). This has been translated as "helper" which does not really do the word justice – more recent scholars say "delivering ally" is better.

So, God takes part of the man – the Hebrew term is structural, architectural like the side of a building. Man is metaphorically split down the middle and God fashions woman. The structural imagery shows the intended mutuality and interdependency between male and female. It also starts filling out the idea of the man being the head in a sense of being a life source, a source of nourishment, because woman is fashioned from him. What an astonishing picture this paints! The nature of *ezer* – a delivering ally is what the man needs to fulfil his purpose.

Here is one way to think about it. The countries conquered by the Nazis couldn't save themselves. They needed a delivering ally to rescue them and release them to grow and flourish. On D-Day, the allies landed on the Normandy beaches to liberate. They were self-sacrificial, and in a sense they submitted themselves for the good of all those people in France and beyond. God is often also described as an *ezer* to humanity.

Here is another example. Before I met Sarah and I had no compulsion to regularly give money. She challenged me to start doing this and still challenges me now. Without her I think I was at risk of growing to love money.

Verses 25 - 31 see Paul saying the husband should love his wife in a practical sense – with care, self-sacrifice and kindness. Back we are to Genesis – Christ is portrayed as the true Adam. So, Paul is recovering the role of man through the lens of Christ - to give his wife special attention, to care, be kind, set aside his power and lay down his life for his wife. Despite our 21<sup>st</sup> Century advances, there is still sexism, misogyny, and women can at times experience life as second-class citizens – men need to be an advocate.

The freedom of the Gospel doesn't take away from the *ezer* role of women to be an ally to her husband – to be with him, to challenge, to help him develop. For men, Paul is saying you must reject the Roman hierarchy structure, lay aside your cultural power and be for your wife – to be sacrificial, to be kind, to be loving - no matter the cost.

To draw on an image from Tim Mackie – we have a dance here. Husband and wife dancing together doing different moves, but together blending into a beautiful dynamic oneness of movement and co-ordination.

Paul then addresses children. Paul expected children to hear this letter being read out – so we are never too young (or old!) to be theological – to reflect and experience God's word. In that world, no-one wrote directly to children. Paul calls on children to obey their parents and quotes the one of the Ten Commandments – “honour your parents and it will go well for you”. When I was 20, I dishonoured my mother by lying to her about what I was going to do in the summer, because I know she would not like it. This fractured our relationship. It did not go well for me. I needed God's forgiveness.

Paul then addresses fathers. Again, in Roman culture, they had the power and had a low view of children. Paul is directly challenging Dads not to treat their children unfairly and provoke them into hot anger.

I am weak here and have been challenged repeatedly in a loving way by my delivering ally. I'm conscious that I don't treat Benjamin fairly and I am inconsistent and petty with him compared to his sisters – all coming from my selfishness and sin. He gets angry, and it's to his credit that he does not get more angry with me.

Paul says that Dads must have the mindset of Christ when bringing up children so they can discern what is right and good. Dads must have their minds transformed by the renewing of the Spirit - they must meditate on God's word, they need support and help from other Christians, and they need the Holy Spirit.

Some of you here might have had very difficult relationships with your parents, and some great relationships. Perhaps you felt hot anger towards them because of how they treated you. I am sorry for you. Perhaps you are a parent and you're aware that you've not treated your children well. Now could be a time to bring it to the Lord.

Finally, we move to the last set of relationships in the Roman home – slaves. When we think of slaves our minds turn to the horrors and injustice of the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery in the Roman Empire was different. Anyone could be a slave – it was not limited to a particular racial or ethnic group. In ancient Rome at the beginning of the first century it is estimated that between 20 and 40% of the population were slaves. Ephesus as a major urban centre would have had a similar proportion of slaves. Slaves had no rights and masters could treat them however they liked. The Roman Empire was dependent on slavery economically.

Paul could be criticised for not calling for slavery to end because of the saving work of Jesus but consider if that would be a wise thing for him to say. Any uprising or descension would have been brutally suppressed by the Romans, and those small churches would have been wiped out – but Paul is saying some dynamite things here!

Paul tells slaves to obey their masters, but notice he redirects the slaves to adopt the mindset that they are serving Christ. Paul builds on this saying that service to Christ involves the heart, enthusiasm and encourages them by saying Jesus recognises the good they do even if no one else does. Then in verse 9 he says something extraordinary – masters should treat their slaves in the same way! Masters should recognise that they are both equally slaves of Christ and they should respect their slaves and be kind to them. Paul has sown the seeds to undo the very heart of slavery – saying the true owner is Jesus who lays down his life for them.

We're not slaves, and our country is not the same as Rome. However, we do work. And if we work for someone else, I think Paul's thinking here is applicable. Ultimately, when we work, we should do so as working for Christ. We should not look to glorify ourselves or concern ourselves with chasing after promotions or human approval. Nor should we let our work become our identity – we live, move and have our being in Christ. So, what to make of all this – this way of being human together in our homes, and lives that we take our stand on.

*Here are some final thoughts.*

For those of you who are married. Husbands, be an advocate for your wife - you must love her unconditionally and care for her – there is still sexism and misogyny in our culture.

Women, be with your husband and alongside them – be the delivering ally. Perhaps your marriage is difficult (and if you are suffering abuse or coercion – this is wrong, not your fault, and please seek help). Perhaps you know other marriages that have fallen apart, or may fall apart. Perhaps you are married, and you would like the Holy Spirit to renew and help you dance better together.

Children – give your parent a big hug – tell them something you love about them. If you had a parent who was difficult, or a father who has provoked you to hot anger (because of their unfairness and arbitrariness), then perhaps pray for healing and God’s assurance for you. If you can’t hug them, use your phone to express what they mean to you.

Finally, workers - who do you work for? Is what others think the motivating factor. Do you chase after career advancement and is this shaping your identity. You work as if for Christ. Something to pray and reflect on. These are some actions here you can do now. You could sit and reflect. You could seek prayer with those around you.

#### Colossians 3:10-11

*<sup>10</sup>Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. <sup>11</sup>Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*