

“What Do We Do About Submission?”

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Ephesians 5:21-6:9

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I'd like us to begin by focusing on a mystery. Not a mystery in the Sherlock Holmes sense, but a mystery in the biblical sense, a mystery that is hidden from normal eyes and can only be revealed to us as part of God's work in our lives. The mystery is this: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well.” Those are the words of Jesus, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount, when He's teaching us not to worry about things like food and drink and clothing because our Father knows that we need them and He is faithful. It's a mystery; it takes some time to really digest what it means to seek *first* His kingdom and His righteousness. It's something that is too easy for us to think we've got it, but in reality we need to let it soak in. It's powerful stuff.

We need to start there — seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and then all these other things will be given to you as well — because today we're talking about the biblical call to submission, and we're going to be covering a lot of ground and getting into a lot of detailed stuff, but our focal point will always be that call of Jesus. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well. We've got a couple more weeks before Lent, and we've been spending this time looking at a few of the aspects of our faith that are particularly challenging to us, if we take them seriously. We asked what we do about hell, and we answered that we charge its gates because the reality of hell ought to motivate us outward to seek and save those who are lost. We asked what we do about the sin of greed, because it's an incredibly destructive sin that our culture either ignores or actively rewards, and we answered that we replace greed with things of true value: love and generosity toward God and others.

And today we're looking at this call to submission that we see at various points in the Bible. Whereas greed is a sin that our world doesn't think is a sin, and in fact it's a sin that our world rewards, submission is a virtue that our world mocks. We have a hard time with the call to submit. It's a challenge for us. Some of us are proud and don't want to submit, while others of us think God wants us to be doormats, and we end up enabling the bullies around us. Even when we take the call to submit seriously, it's hard to know what exactly that means. Does submission mean inaction in the face of injustice? That doesn't seem to line up with God's call to love others with an active love. There's a lot to be said, and we don't have time to answer all the questions that might be raised, but the essence of submission is that mystery that takes time to fully understand: seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.

We begin by affirming that submission is indeed a call to all Christians. It's not that some people are called to submit some of the time; all Christians ought to have lives characterized by submission. Again, “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” applies to all of us, and that's really a call to submission. We all need to submit our lives before God. Serving Him should be our top priority, and that means that all our other priorities submit. That's integral to every fully-lived Christian life.

But part of the challenge of submission comes from the fact that some people read the Bible in such a way that submission is not equally a part of all Christians' lives. Some parts of the church

make submission more challenging that it ought to be because they specifically single out women for an extra level of submission, and that causes tension not only with the larger culture but also with those in the church who have a better reading of Scripture. There are several places in the New Testament, and our reading from Ephesians today is one of them, that appear at first glance to be telling women that they are expected to submit to men, and especially their husbands, in a way that does not apply to men. In our Ephesians passage, for example, we read that women are to submit to their husbands in everything, but husbands are to *love* their wives, which sounds rather unequal. There are some other troubling parts of the New Testament where Paul says that women are expected to keep silent in church, and they cannot teach men, and from all of this, there are some parts of the church that have built up an entire theological justification that amounts to women being expected to submit to men for no other reason than their genders. And so we might have some confused ideas about what submission entails, and who submits to whom, and then we run up against our culture in which women are gaining greater and greater equality with men.

And so we take this call to submission and make it a continuation of our squabbles about who gets what power in our relationships and our churches, which is the exact opposite of what Paul and the other writers of the New Testament were trying to do when they called us to submit. The simple fact of the matter is that those who claim to be more faithful to the Bible because they insist on so-called “traditional gender roles” — that is, the wife is expected to stay at home because she is the wife while the husband goes out and provides for his family because he is the husband, and from that then they build an entire theological structure to defend such things as excluding women from ordained ministry — those who think the Bible commands that actually have a terrible understanding of what the Bible says. It is thoroughly flawed.

There are indeed times when the Bible reinforces a patriarchal view of the world, but it was written in a very patriarchal context. When we look at the larger scope of Scripture, though, we see a clear trajectory of principles making it clear that in the kingdom of God, there is neither male nor female. The blood of Christ is freely available to all, regardless of gender, and the gifts of the Spirit are available to all, regardless of gender. In that very patriarchal context of the ancient Mediterranean world, we see both Old Testament and New Testament communities of faith that are clearly led by women, we see women clearly called and gifted by the Spirit for leadership in the church, and we see women preachers and even an Apostle. So when we see those verses that seem to restrict women because they are women, there must be something else going on there, some other reason for the restriction, and if we look carefully, that’s just what we see.

We don’t have time to go into the details of all of those passages this morning, but if you want to know more about why the Wesleyan Church takes a stance in favor of gender equality and the ordination of women, we have a very good, very readable pamphlet available called “Why Wesleyans Favor Women in Ministry.” What it comes down to is that there were some early Christians who heard the message about freedom in Christ and took it too far. If I’m a slave and I hear the good news of freedom in Christ, does that imply that I can just walk out on my master? If I’m a woman married to a non-Christian husband, does my freedom in Christ release me from my marriage? If I have been empowered in Christ in ways that I’ve never known before, does that mean I can take my new power and run amok with it? That was the error the Apostles were trying to correct when they said some of those things to women and slaves that sound harsh to us today. They’re telling these folks that

freedom in Christ is not a license for rebellion. Freedom in Christ does not mean that you can take your freedom and use it as an excuse for arrogance toward others.

So why is it that the Bible uses such apparently unequal language, then, with regard to men and women? Why doesn't Paul just tell wives to submit to their husbands *and* husbands to submit to their wives, if that's what he really means? Because now we're getting into what the biblical idea of submission is really all about. The point is that submission has more to do with being faithful to God than it does with who has power over whom in human relationships. The early Christians lived in honor and shame cultures; everything revolved around what rung you occupied on the social ladder. You gave honor to those up the ladder from you, and those below you gave you honor. Deviating from that ladder would bring you shame, which was the gravest evil in their eyes, but again, the Apostles were preaching a message of unity and freedom and equality for all in the family of God. It was a new and different social structure, so the question was whether this new kingdom implied that we could either throw out or walk away from the old one. Do we have the right to assert our power in Christ over those who have previously asserted their power over us? And the answer of the Apostles is no, you are not free from respecting those over you, but now, because of the work of Christ, you also need to respect and love those who were formerly beneath you. Don't rebel against your socially accepted place, expand your horizons of love and faithfulness to include those whom you previously were not obligated to love.

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; don't seek first your status or your power or your bargaining chips. Seek first His kingdom. That's submission. Our reading in Ephesians begins with that command to "submit to *one another* out of reverence for Christ." And then it goes on and looks at a variety of traditionally unequal relationships; in the cases where one person is "below" the other, like wives to husbands and children to parents, he says that you still need to honor the other person. But then, in the cases where one person is "above" the other, like husbands to their wives or masters to their slaves, he actually adds to the duties that would normally be expected of them: because they are now in Christ, they must love and respect those who are "beneath" them.

Once we understand that submission is not a step backward into the past when women were subordinate to men, we have to understand that submission is a key characteristic of life in Christ for all of us because we are all equal under God. There is a new kingdom in Christ that overthrows the old kingdoms of the world with their politics and power plays, but the kingdom of Christ overthrows them in unexpected ways. It does not overthrow them by exerting its power over them through violence and aggression and posturing, it overcomes them by denying the validity of their definition of power. It's telling those slaveowners that slavery is simply irrelevant to those who are in Christ, because more than setting your slaves free, you're called to love them as your brothers and sisters. That's incredibly subversive to the world's definitions of power, but it's subversive in an even more subversive way, because it rejects the validity of the use of violence and coercion to achieve its ends.

It's an age-old principle in God's family; He has always loved to lift up the humble and humble the powerful while still affirming the humanity of both. We read part of that wonderful story of Naaman, the great general of a foreign army who hears of a potential cure for his sickness from the instructions of a humble servant girl. And then this great general is insulted by the fact that the prophet Elisha doesn't even see him in person, and again, it takes his servants' suggestions to get him to listen. This great man submits to the insights of the humble, and God heals him. Contrast that with

the rest of the story in the second half of the chapter, where Elisha's servant Gehazi succumbs to pride and steps beyond his authority in accepting a gift from Naaman that Elisha had rejected, and Gehazi is punished for his pride.

Submission requires our faith in the faithfulness of God. Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Because we rely on the power of Christ, we do not have to play by the world's rules of power politics, and we are able to submit to God and one another in love. It doesn't mean that we're passive, or that we're doormats, or that we're weak in the face of abuse and persecution. Love is not passive or weak. It means that we submit our priorities to Jesus Christ, and we use His methods in response to the world. It means that we are free not to fight for our own rights or privileges; we don't have to get caught up in the world's race for power and prestige. We are free to seek His kingdom and His righteousness, and then all these other things will be given to us. Our submission to God and others is one of our most powerful witnesses to our faith in God, because it shows that we trust God's power, not our own.

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Can I be honest? I have a hard time with this. I know that as a pastor I'm supposed to be perfect and all, but sometimes I have my own priorities, and I kind of like them. Sometimes I'd rather do my own thing. Sometimes it's hard to bend the knee and be subject to His kingdom. Sometimes it's hard to submit to the wisdom and words of other people. Sometimes I think I know what I'm doing pretty well, thank you very much. Maybe you're like me, and if so, let's bend the knee and submit to God together.



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