



Household of Faith

Kicking It Off

Who is someone in your life you would follow even when you disagreed with them, and what did they do to earn that?

Read

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

Summary

Most of us do not have a problem submitting to God. God is perfect, so leaning our weight on Him feels safe. The trouble comes when God asks us to order our lives under people who are not perfect, a spouse, a parent, a boss, the very people who have let us down before. Our instinct is to hedge. We will go along with it until the moment it stops feeling safe, and then we are out. The whole passage hits that nerve on purpose.

Paul has just told the church to submit to one another, and now he shows what that looks like in the three relationships that filled up ancient life: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. In every case the call is the same. Submit, honor, serve, not because the other person has earned it, but as an act of worship toward the Lord. A wife orders herself under her husband as to the Lord. A child honors a parent in the Lord. A worker serves as to the Lord and not to man. The vertical relationship reframes every horizontal one, so obedience becomes worship and authority becomes accountability.

The picture that holds it together is climbing. Think of a top rope. The wall is the relationship, steep and unforgiving in spots, and your climbing partner is imperfect. What lets you commit your weight is not the wall and not the partner. It is the rope, and the One holding it from above. That is why you can love a hard spouse, honor a parent who hurt you, or work for a boss who has not earned your respect. You are not anchored to them. You are anchored to God, and He will not let you fall to your demise. People make terrible anchors, because we are afraid and broken and can barely hold ourselves. The gospel is good news because the Lord is the anchor, and He has already caught you. The only question left is whether you will have the courage to climb again.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. We tend to submit happily to God but resist submitting to imperfect people. Where in your life do you find it hardest to defer to someone who has not earned your trust?
3. Paul calls the husband to a sacrificial love that pictures Christ giving Himself for the church. What would it look like for you to give of yourself to someone without waiting for them to deserve it first?
4. We are called to honor our parents from the nursery to the nursing home, even when those parents have not been perfect. Is there a relationship where God may be asking you to show honor that does not depend on the other person being right?
5. We are quick to make people our anchor, a spouse, a parent, a job, and then we are crushed when they fail us. What person or role have you been leaning your full weight on instead of leaning on God?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"The point that Paul is making is that we keep our eyes focused on the Lord, knowing that in all scenarios He is the one who holds us tight. Too many times we keep our eyes focused on people when in fact we should keep our eyes focused on the Lord."

"Marriage is not intended to be handcuffs for you. It is not the ball and chain. It is an image of how God loves the church, and of how the church is called to love the Lord."

"This command isn't just about little children. It is from the nursery to the nursing home. We are called to honor our parents their entire lives, not because it is deserved, but because we are giving honor to God."

"People make terrible anchors, because we are afraid, we are broken, we can barely hold ourselves. So what makes you think people can hold other people? What makes the gospel so beautiful is that the Lord is our anchor."

Sermon Notes

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

6 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. 9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Outline

1. A Marriage That Points Past Itself (5:22-33)

- a. The whole section grows out of "submit to one another" (v. 21). A wife's submission is not a separate category. It is one instance of the mutual submission Paul commands the whole church, ordered "as to the Lord" (v. 22) rather than forced by a husband who has earned it.
- b. Headship is defined by the cross, not by command. The husband is head "even as Christ is the head of the church" (v. 23), and the pattern is the One who "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (v. 25). The heavier word falls on the husband, and its weight is sacrifice.
- c. The husband does not save his wife. Christ saves the church, and marriage is the picture of that, not a smaller version of it.
- d. Marriage is an image, not the destination. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and says the one-flesh union "refers to Christ and the church" (v. 32). Two become one, and that fusion points to the union of Christ and His people in heaven.

2. Honor That Outlasts Childhood (6:1-4)

- a. Children obey "in the Lord, for this is right" (v. 1). The vertical anchor again. Obedience is rendered to Christ first.
- b. Honor is wider and longer than obedience. Paul reaches back to the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12), the first commandment with a promise. Obedience belongs to childhood, but honor runs from the nursery to the nursing home, even toward parents who hurt us.
- c. Fathers must "not provoke your children to anger" (v. 4) but raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. God the Father is not Zeus with a thunderbolt. He corrects in order to raise us up, and earthly fathers are called to the same gentleness.
- d. We honor imperfect parents not by pretending they were perfect, but by trusting that God turned even the trauma into something good.

3. The Anchor That Holds When the Other Person Doesn't (6:5-9)

- a. Service is rendered upward first. Slaves serve "as you would Christ... as to the Lord and not to man" (vv. 5-7). The cruelest master cannot degrade work that is finally offered to the Lord, who pays the wage Himself (v. 8).
- b. Paul levels the house. "Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening" (v. 9). Slave and master share one Master who shows no partiality, and that truth dissolves the institution from the inside.
- c. People make terrible anchors. We are afraid, broken, and cannot hold ourselves, let alone each other. The gospel is beautiful because the Lord is the anchor.

- d. This is not a command to stay under abuse. The gospel that frees the slave does not chain the one being crushed, and the church must step in where a husband fails to love as Christ loves.

Notes

I run a lot these days, but before the marathons there was another sport I gave about ten years to, and it came to me through church. A man in our lobby was the best evangelist I have ever met for rock climbing. He would corner anyone who would listen and tell them to come to the gym. A few of us went. He taught us the harness, the knots, the checks you run before you trust your weight to a rope. Some people refused outright, and their reason was simple. They were afraid of falling and dying. I understood them, because I am terrified of heights. What I learned over those years is that the fear never quite leaves, but it changes its address. You stop fearing the height and start trusting the gear. You can hang sixty or seventy feet up, look down, and feel no panic, because you know the rope will catch you.

I bring climbing into a passage about marriage, parents, children, and slaves because this is a hard text for our moment, and I think the picture unlocks it. Paul has just told the Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit, and he ends that thought by saying, "submitting to one another." Everything that follows is the worked example of that one line. He gives three relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. In each one the call is to submit, and in each one the submission is finally to God. The early church heard it that way. As they ordered themselves under people, they understood they were ordering themselves under the Lord.

The reason this lands so hard on us is not the words. We understand submission and respect. The trouble is that we live in a culture that will not submit to anyone, and I understand why. The people we are told to submit to are not perfect. They are not even especially wise or good. So why would God ask me to place myself under someone who is fallen? I will gladly submit to God, because God is perfect. But to a broken person? That is where we balk. Look closely at the three examples, though, and you see the focal point is never that the other person has it together. The assumption is the opposite. They are as fallen as we are. The call is to submit to them as you would submit to the Lord.

What we love to do instead is hedge. We will submit until the moment it stops feeling safe, and then we are gone. The instant it gets uncomfortable, we are out. I feel the same pull. When I see a command this size, submit to one another, it looks like a wall I cannot climb on my own strength. I can manage the first ten moves. If I fall there, maybe I break a leg but I live. But this wall has fifty moves, and that is more than I can handle. The point is that we are submitting under God, and God says, "I have you." He is the rope. He is the one who makes sure the fall does not end in your demise. This passage never promises that your spouse will not fail you, or that your parents will not wound you, or that your boss will be fair. It promises that in every one of those scenarios

the Lord holds you tight. Too often we keep our eyes on people when we should keep them on Him.

Marriage shows this first. To wives Paul says submit to your husbands as to the Lord, and our age recoils, because it sounds like Paul is against women. He is not. He is speaking to a deeper truth. In his world almost no one married for romance. Marriage was an economic and legal arrangement, often between a girl of twelve to sixteen and a man in his late twenties, arranged by families for survival and children. The women he addressed already knew their role. What Paul does is lift it. You are not merely submitting to this man you were given to. You are doing it as an act of worship to God. Then he turns to the husband, and the weight shifts. The hierarchy he describes is the hierarchy of Christ and the church, not a claim that the man saves his wife. Christ is the head because Christ gave His life for the church. So the call to the husband is costly by design. Not because his love saves anyone, but because his love is a picture, an embodiment of the cross. I see an indictment of modern manhood here. People read this and pity the woman told to submit, and I want to say I wish I could submit. Submitting to Jesus is the better deal. It is the husband's call that is heavy, because he is asked to lay down his life. And Paul finally admits he is dealing with a mystery he can barely hold, that two become one flesh, that Christ and the church will be wed. That oneness is the image of heaven.

Then come parents and children. Honor your father and mother, the first commandment with a promise. Notice it says honor, not only obey. Obedience belongs to childhood. Honor never expires. It changes shape as parents age and the roles flip, but it does not end. I hear my own generation talk about childhood trauma, and I am a believer in good therapy, especially Christian therapy, because it shows how God can take the trauma and make it good. That is not denying the wound. It is refusing to let the wound be the end of the story. We do not honor our parents by cataloguing how they failed us. We honor them by saying God made it good. To fathers the word is do not provoke your children to anger. The old caricature of God the Father is Zeus with a thunderbolt, ready to smite. Paul says the opposite. The Father instructs and disciplines because He loves, and the question I have to ask myself is whether I actually believe God is gentle with me. I get too loud. I have to be deliberate when I correct my own children, because the rebuke is real but it has to come with kindness, the way my Father in heaven deals with me.

The hardest case Paul saves for last, slaves and masters. This has been twisted into a defense of slavery, but Paul is dismantling it. He tells slaves to work as to the Lord, because God sees the work and God pays the wage, and that takes faith to believe when your master is cruel and not even a Christian. Then he turns to the masters and says, "do the same to them, and stop your threatening." He reminds them they share one Master in

heaven who shows no partiality. Slave and master kneel before the same God. Follow that logic honestly and the institution has no ground left to stand on, which is why Paul could send Onesimus back as a beloved brother.

Underneath all three relationships is one theme. Many of us want to get closer to God, and God hands us difficult people. They are not the obstacle to growing in Him. They are the avenue. People make terrible anchors. We are afraid and broken and can barely hold ourselves, so why would we expect a person to hold us? The gospel is beautiful because the Lord is the anchor. So I will not make my spouse my anchor, or my children, or my boss. I climb the hard wall toward Him. I should add a clear caveat, because domestic violence is common, even in the church. None of this tells a wife to stay where she is being harmed. The gospel that frees the slave does not chain the abused, and the church must discipline a man who fails to love his wife as Christ loves the church.

So here is where I land. The easy routes never test you. It is the hard climb, hanging by a fingertip with your arms shaking, where you find out whether you trust the rope. There are people God is asking you to love when you feel you are hanging by a thread, and He is asking, do you trust Me to catch you. We are all going to fail. The pressure is off, because the cross catches you. The real question is whether you will try again. Are you done with your marriage, your kids, your parents, your boss? Or will you let the gospel catch you, and take another pass at the wall. You have unlimited tries. He has already caught you. The only question left is whether you have the courage to climb again.

Blog

We usually meet a hard person and assume they are the problem. If my spouse were easier, I would be more patient. If my father had been kinder, I would not still be guarding my heart. If my boss were fair, I would not be tempted to grow bitter or cut corners. We carry a quiet theory about our own holiness, that we would look a great deal more like Jesus if the people around us were not making it so difficult. Ephesians 5:22 through 6:9 turns that theory on its head. The difficult people in our lives are not what stands between us and Christ. Most of the time they are the road to Him. The Lord sets them in front of us on purpose, because the love He is forming in us can only be learned on people who have not earned it.

That is a hard thing to hear, so start with a smaller picture. Anyone who has climbed knows you do not get stronger on only the easy routes. You get stronger on the wall that pushes your limits, the one with the awkward reach and the hold that is never quite where you want it. The resistance is not the obstacle to becoming a climber. It is the training. And you can give yourself to a wall like that, fully and without panic, because you are held from above. I will say more about that picture on Sunday. For now, hold onto the two halves of it. The hard relationship is the training ground, and you are held the whole time you climb it.

Watch what Paul does with the relationships that fill an ordinary life. He takes marriage, parenting, and work, the three places where most of our friction actually lives, and he anchors every one of them to the Lord before he says a word about the other person. Wives submit "as to the Lord" (5:22). Children obey "in the Lord" (6:1). Servants work "as to the Lord and not to man" (6:7). Even the man in charge is told he answers to a "Master in heaven" who shows "no partiality" (6:9). Not one of these duties rests on whether the other person deserves it. The audience is Christ. That single move is the hinge for everything else, because once the other person's worthiness is off the table, the relationship stops being mainly about them and becomes about who I am becoming in it.

This is why the people who are hardest to love are not in the way of our growth. They are the means of it. We are called to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (5:2), and the astonishing thing about that love is its direction. Christ did not wait until we were lovely. He loved us while we were still unlovely, still set against Him, and He gave Himself for us anyway. If that is the love we are meant to emulate, we will never learn it on people who are easy to love. Easy people ask nothing of us that we did not already have. We learn the love of Christ in the exact place we are tempted to believe we cannot, on the spouse who is hard to live with, the parent who was hard to

grow up under, the boss who has not earned our respect. They are the only school where this kind of love is actually taught, and the Lord enrolls us in it deliberately.

Paul begins with marriage, and the surprise is who carries the weight of the command. In his world a wife's submission was simply assumed, so telling her to order herself under her husband would have raised no eyebrows at all. The shock was the command to the husband, who is told to love "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5:25). Marriages then were arranged for property and family alliance, not affection, and a man owed his wife little beyond provision and heirs. Paul tells him to lay his life down for her. The husband grows into Christ not by being served but by serving, and he learns it in the daily, unglamorous work of loving one particular, imperfect woman over a lifetime. Then Paul lifts the whole thing onto another plane. He quotes Genesis, "the two shall become one flesh," and says the union "refers to Christ and the church" (5:32). Marriage was always meant to be a picture of the gospel, which means the patience and forgiveness it asks of you are not interruptions to your spiritual life. They are the assignment itself.

The same logic runs through the command to honor parents. Paul reaches back to the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (6:2), and the honor he has in mind outlasts childhood. Obedience belongs to the years under a parent's roof and rightly ends as a child grows. Honor never expires. It only changes shape as parents age and the roles slowly reverse. If you are caring for an aging parent now, perhaps one who made your early years hard, you already know how much of Christ that requires of you. You are not honoring them because they earned every bit of it. You honor them in the Lord, and in the honoring you are being shaped into someone who can love the way you were first loved.

Then Paul reaches the hardest relationship in the ancient household, slave and master, and we have to be honest about what he is doing here, because this text has been badly misused. Paul is not blessing slavery. He is regulating a brutal arrangement that already structured his world, and he is planting a truth inside it that will eventually tear it apart. He speaks to slaves as full moral agents who do "the will of God from the heart" (6:6), which the institution itself denied they were. He tells them their reward comes from the Lord "whether he is a slave or free" (6:8), so no cruel master can rob them of it. Then he turns to the masters and tells them to "do the same" and to "stop your threatening" (6:9), reminding them that they and their slaves answer to one impartial Master in heaven. Once you say that the powerful and the powerless kneel before the same Lord, you have knocked the foundation out from under the whole system. It is the same logic that let Paul send a runaway slave back home and ask that

he be received "as a beloved brother" (Philemon 16). The gospel does not leave slavery standing. It hollows it out from the inside until it falls.

That same honesty protects us closer to home. Being held from above while you climb a hard wall is not the same as being roped to someone who is crushing you. Paul treats slaves as people with agency and tells them in another letter to gain their freedom if they can (1 Corinthians 7:21). To order yourself under the Lord is never to surrender your safety. If you are in danger, the call to submit was never a call to stay and be destroyed. The God who frees the slave does not chain the abused.

So the question this passage leaves us with is not how to get the difficult people out of our way. It is what the Lord intends to make of us through them. We keep waiting for our circumstances to change before we will grow, and Paul keeps pointing us back to the people already in front of us. They are not the obstacle to becoming like Christ. They are the avenue to it. He loved us long before we deserved it, and the only way we will ever learn to love like that is to be handed people who do not deserve it either. The spouse, the parent, the person we answer to at work, every one of them is the wall where that love gets built into us, and we can give ourselves to the climb because we are held by the One who loved us first. More on the rope on Sunday. For now, look again at the person you have been treating as the thing standing in your way, and ask whether the Lord may have placed them there to make you look more like His Son.