

Love and Sacrifice, Subjection and Fear

Ephesians 5:15-33

These past two weeks we have looked at two passages which both have as a central theme, love. Not love as we might define it based on our own experiences and affections here in a fallen world, but a different, foreign sort of love that descends from heaven and reorders our thoughts and feelings so that the affections in our hearts and the relationships in our lives begin to reflect and resemble the affections that live in God's heart and the relationships that have always existed in heaven between Father, Son and Spirit and then the angels and those redeemed people who live in heaven now.

So the love God commands believers to learn from him and to exercise with each other is not something we can manufacture from our own worldly experience or by our own fleshly efforts. Last week in 1 Corinthians 13, we heard Paul describe heavenly love, a selfless, patient, kind, generous, humble, upright sort of love that comes to us only after a sovereign act of God. We experience that kind of love as the outcome, Paul wrote, of a Holy Spirit baptism that descends on each of us, all of us as we trust Christ to love and forgive us and give our lives to him for the teaching and shepherding he provides.

It is after God's Spirit makes us his and pours his power into us that we can begin to do things and be things that build up his kingdom in a world where everything about God seems strange and foreign and out of step. And the reason Paul leaned so hard on the Corinthians about real love, and the severe holiness that real love expresses, is that they, and we after them, are tempted to get so taken with what the Spirit empowers us to do, that we are tempted to neglect what the Spirit is leading us to be.

What we do, the accomplishments that so obsess our minds and hearts now will "*fade away*", Paul taught the Corinthians, and what we'll be left with in eternity is "*faith, hope, and love*", immeasurable, largely invisible heart qualities which will make heaven, heaven, when we get there. Because it is the qualities the Spirit grows in our hearts that will make us rich in heaven, not the sound and fury and grandeur of our accomplishments, sacred and otherwise here on earth.

And this week in Ephesians 5, Paul engages in a similar sort of logic, in this passage focusing more on our relationships with each other and less on the motives and affections driving our own individual hearts. But still, here in Ephesians, the whole exercise begins with a sovereign act of God which gets expressed in our common worship by the motion and power of the Spirit God has poured into our hearts. Paul writes to the Ephesian believers, "*Look carefully how you walk...do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.*"

And what flows from the decision to put the wine jug aside and to look to the Spirit for a glad heart is a fellowship where celebration and camaraderie is expressed in a sort of dynamic musical worship where believers sing affection for God and for each other to God and to each other, culminating in the singing of praise and thanks, “*always and for everything,*” Paul writes “*to God the Father in the name our Lord Jesus Christ.*” And then Paul’s teaching spins out of the worship sanctuary and into the relationships we conduct with each other in church and with our spouses in our own families.

Paul writes, “*...be subject to one another out of fear for Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands as to the Lord.*” Now the tendency through the centuries has been, I think, to oversimplify this Greek verb, *hupotasso*, to mean “submit...do what he says”. But I don’t think it can mean simply that here, in part because Paul exhorts all the believers to be subject to each other. In other words, if a brother or sister says something or wants something, it would become our sacred duty to do what he says.

But since what all believers want and what all believers say occasionally dissolves into incoherent cacophony, how could we all simply do what random believers say at random times for random reasons? I think what Paul is getting at more likely is that, when we take Jesus as Lord, we take one another as family, more than that, as royal family. And it follows that we owe and should grant each other the respect and attention that goes with our status as members of God's royal family.

We must “*be subject*” to each other because, as God's children, each of us possess a God-given dignity and status that can never be carelessly trampled without offending the King. It is “*out of fear for Christ*” that we exercise respect and care and gentleness and thoughtfulness with other members of the royal family. And principle becomes more intense and more complicated as Paul shifts his attention from God's family at church to our own marriages at home. “*Wives, be subject to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church...*”.

It is immediately plain that something more than the mutual respect and deference that all believers owe each other is in view here. Because we owe Christ, not just respect, not just deference and thoughtfulness and gentleness, we owe him obedience. What he commands, we must do as his disciples in his kingdom, and ultimately within reason, subject to the confines taught in the gospel, wives owe their husbands a similar sort of obedience. Now I added those qualifying clauses to what seems a simple command because human husbands are fallen and I believe there is a limit past which a woman's obligation to her husband is transcended by what she owes God.

Still, Paul's words chart a straight and narrow path for a woman to enter if she takes a man for a husband: *"...as the church is subject to Christ in all things, so wives are to husbands in all things."*

And to my own mind what prevents this subjection from becoming some sort of mindless, joyless, servitude is a balanced understanding of just how the church is subject to Christ. Because the fact is that since we fell, the moment we left the garden, the Almighty became that loving, forgiving bridegroom seeking men and women in every age to become together the bride whom he redeems to be his beloved.

So we see in the Old Testament a long parade of unworthy souls who become God's servants and children, together his bride, and yet God saves them, reproves them, sanctifies them without depriving them of their own hearts and their own voices. What does it say of Seth, the redeemed son of Adam and Eve who became the father of a believing community way back then? It says that, with Seth, *"people began to call on the name of the LORD."* In other words, these were a people, this was a bride who was subject to God and to whom God gave a heart and voice.

We see this played out, eons later, in the life of Abraham, another fallen man God called and redeemed to be the leader of his people, a spokesman for the bride. In Genesis 18, God is about to render a majestic, catastrophic judgment against Sodom. But before he acts, God goes through this odd bit of reasoning.

The Almighty says to himself, *"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"*

So God Almighty, who need not consult anyone, allows Abraham to become an advocate for sinners, brings Abraham's heart and his voice into play. And Abraham makes a strong case, drives a hard bargain because his nephew is down there in that city. And yet the whole time Abraham is entirely subject to God as he will prove later when he marches Isaac up Mount Moriah to be a sacrifice if that's what God commands. But his subjection to God is dynamic, God's mercy comes into play on Mt. Moriah and Abraham's heart and voice come into play in the case of Sodom and the family of Lot.

We see the same sort of absolute but dynamic subjection in the life of Moses, in Numbers 14, where old Israel ran egregiously afoul of all the grace God had shown them, getting them free from Egypt and to the doorstep of the Promised Land, where Israel badly failed. In that case, strangely, God offers to make Moses the new father of faith and Moses' descendants the new chosen people. And even more strangely, Moses refuses the deal and argues that old Israel

should be preserved. And strangest of all, God is pleased to be contradicted by the loyalty and faithfulness Moses shows to a faithless people. God allows the heart and voice of Moses to sway his verdict in Israel's favor.

Now Abraham and Moses in both instances foreshadow God's own eternally begotten Son, who would take human flesh, and live as one of us, absolutely subject and obedient to his Father, and yet he was granted his heart and his voice to advocate for us. It was not thoughtless servitude that propelled Jesus to a cross for our sins. He said in the garden, in so many words, "Father, about this cross, I don't want it. Can you see your way clear to letting it pass me by?" His heart longed and his voice spoke and yet the whole time he was absolutely subject to his Father. *"Yet not my will, but yours."* Jesus said.

He is fit to be the head of the church, he is worthy of the absolute subjection and obedience we owe him, at least in part because he doesn't command a thing of us that he was unwilling to do himself. That's why a Roman centurion in Luke's gospel trusted Jesus to heal his servant without the fanfare of a personal appearance. *"I myself,"* he said, or *"I too am a man under authority...just say the word..."* he told Jesus.

Jesus put it this way, he said, *"Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you (That's subjection language, you wore a yoke if you were a slave.) Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble at heart and you shall find rest for your souls."*

We can trust him because, as Jesus told us, he did not come *"to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many."* We can learn to serve, we can afford to be subject to a King like that. Which is precisely why in both the passages we heard this morning, Paul's teaching about real love and a genuine, dynamic subjection begin with a sovereign act of God, a work of the Spirit that finds its origin in the worship we offer him together. There is a place in our lives for wine.

Wine can lift and gladden our hearts and even lead us to sing. But God's Spirit living in our hearts, influencing our thoughts and affections can lead us each in our turn to live like Jesus, absolutely subject to the will and purpose and design of the Father, absolutely free to love and give ourselves away to those people whom God has called us to love and serve. This is what Jesus did and this is what, by the Spirit's power, we can and must do in the relationships God calls us to undertake.

"Wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord...Husbands love your wives ...as...Christ loved the church and gave himself away for her." The difficulty of teaching subjection and love as some sort of administrative flow chart is that it speaks nothing of the sort of trust and abandon

and affection that finds its origin in the worship we offer God together as his bride, his royal family.

There is between persons who love one another a stability and confidence that allows each one to be him or her self and requires each one to bend and serve so that we all end up closer to God and closer to each other at the end of the day. A husband is called to be lord in his own house, for his own family, to rule and serve in a way that everyone involved winds up safe and sound and close to Christ.

A wife is called to use her heart and voice to build and help her husband in this humanly impossible role God has called him to live out. You think subjection is hard? Try learning to love people as Jesus loves people, trying learning to rule things with the selfless wisdom that Jesus always, ever brings to bear. The truth is that both roles are impossible for fallen men and women to live out unless the grace of God, forgiveness and repentance and humility and trust, are constantly in play.

Marriage and family, wives and husbands, parents and children are the first and principal venue in which God teaches people love and holiness, service and obedience. What we make of God and each other at home is what God uses to build his kingdom through the church and to make us light and salt to a society that has lost its grip on what frees and empowers people to love one another.