

Series: Rethinking Church

Today: Subject to One Another

Text: Ephesians 5:21-6:10

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, August 22, 2010

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

If you weren't with us last week, you missed my confession. Chapter 5 of Ephesians is one of the texts in the scripture I have successfully avoided as a preaching text for nearly 40 years of ministry. After our services, someone asked me why, and I told him that the advice which Paul gives in this chapter is so culturally specific that it is very difficult to translate it to our 21st century lives. It must be understood in the cultural context it was written, and that is very difficult. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the second half of chapter 5 when Paul gives his instructions on Christian marriage, relationships with children, and relationships with slaves—slaves in the 21st century? I don't think so.

So how do we understand the advice that Paul is giving? If you are one who takes the Bible literally, the message is clear. You simply lift the instructions on marriage from the page and apply them to your marriage. Women play a subservient role. Children are to know their place, and you go out and get yourself a slave. However, we are not biblical literalists in the reformed tradition. We take the bible seriously, but we do not take it literally. We struggle to understand both the content and the context of the passage, and then we attempt application.

Dan Snyder is preaching on this same text at our Cherry Street service, and he comes out of the literalist tradition; or at least he did until he went to seminary. As we talked about this text this week, he said he has preached on Ephesians 5 several times. However this week he was faced with a dilemma. He could not use the Bible as he had used it in the past. His seminary

training has taught him that it is dangerous to interpret the content without first asking the context of the writing and understanding it before making the leap to the world in which we live.

To do so would be kind of like the little boy was attending his first wedding. After the service, his cousin asked him, "How many women can a man marry?"

"Sixteen," the boy responded. His cousin was amazed that he had an answer so quickly. "How do you know that?"

"Easy," the little boy said. "All you have to do is add it up, like the pastor said, 4 better, 4 worse, 4 richer, 4 poorer."

So let's begin the task of understanding Paul's advice in Ephesians 5 with the following as our outline: Be Subject to One Another; Advice on Marriage, and Advice on Parenting.

Be Subject to One Another

It depends on which version of the Bible you read where verse 21 of our text is placed. Some versions place it as an addendum to the first 20 verses, but the NRSV has it as a standalone paragraph. It introduces the next section of Paul's advice on family relationships, and for me, that is where it seems appropriately placed: "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*"

These are the marching orders for Paul when it comes to relationships. Everyone has the same rights as a child of God. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be heard. No one is superior and no one is inferior. When we are part of the body of Christ, we must respect one another, place the other person's needs equal to our own needs. We show how much God has demonstrated God's love for us by the way we treat each other.

During my sabbatical leave a few years ago, I was privileged to spend a week at a Benedictine monastery in Vermont called the Weston Priory. While there I worshipped with the

monks. I ate with the monks. I worked with them, studied with them and prayed with them. This Presbyterian pastor was made to feel as though he belonged.

When I asked one of the monks about the hospitality I received, he told me that it was the rule of St. Benedict that *“all guests were to be welcomed as Christ for he himself will say, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”* (Chapter 53 of the Rule of St. Benedict) We could surely learn something from the Benedictines about being subject to one another.

In the Presbyterian Church we try to live out what it means to be subject to one another in the way we make our decisions; our polity. It may come as a surprise to some that there is very little hierarchy in our church. The decisions we make are all made in an orderly process, and they are made by groups of people, not individuals.

As the pastor of this church, I have very little authority. I am given the power to preach the Word of God as it is revealed to me. I am given the power to select the hymns we sing, though in this church, I share that authority with Tim Sidebothom. So preaching what I feel called to preach is the only authority I can claim as my own. That’s it. Everything else is decided in ordered groups by the Session, the Deacons, and the Trustees.

We make decisions after thorough discussion of the issues. We listen to one another, debate the merits of each other’s arguments, study the issues carefully, and then we take a vote. We believe that God speaks to us through that process of mutual respect for one another’s opinions as each person has been guided by the Spirit of God. There is no “my way or the highway” in our discussion of issues. We respect each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, and move forward together as God reveals God’s will for us through the voice of the church. We are subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. This is what it means to live out our faith as the body of Christ in the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

Advice on Marriage

Now Paul takes this statement and applies it to marriage and to the raising of children. In his commentary on this passage Maxie Dunham says, *“It is a fact of history that no persons owe more to Christ than women and children. What Christ and the impact of His gospel did for women and children triggered perhaps the most dramatic social revolution of all ages.”*

Today we don't see Paul as much of a revolutionary. By many he is seen today as an oppressor of women, or at a minimum one who preserved the status quo of a subservient position of women. However, those who feel this way do not understand the revolutionary nature of the advice on marriage he gives.

Women in Paul's day had no standing. They were viewed as property to be used by men for their pleasure, for the production of offspring, and for serving the needs of the man. Women holding equality in a relationship in a culture where women were not given the rights they have rightfully demanded in this modern era was a foreign concept. So when Paul suggests that women should be treated with respect, it was a radical idea. The real tragedy is that we have frozen Paul in the first century without understanding that he was an advocate for the rights of those whom society would just as soon keep in their subservient place.

Yes, Paul says that women are to be subject to their husbands. That was the expected role of the time in which Paul lived. His advice is to do it as an act of faith and not out of a sense of duty. Just as we are all under God's authority, women are to see their relationship with their husbands as a way of living out their faith.

It is the advice to husbands that is really radical. They are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. They are to give their lives sacrificially so as to help their wives find satisfaction in life. It is this sense of mutuality of relationship that is radical.

Paul says there is a mutuality of relationship that is the new gold standard for marriages. Wives are to care for their husbands, and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.

The pastor who officiated at our wedding over 40 years ago gave us some great advice. He said that successful people make lists of their priorities and they work on those lists by setting goals and objectives that help them to accomplish their priorities. He encouraged us to make each other our #1 priority in life; that if it is my priority to meet Cherie's needs and if it is Cherie's priority to help meet mine, both of our needs will be met. Cherie has done better with that advice than I have, but thanks be to God, both of us have tried to live out that advice.

The argument can be made that mutuality in marriage is good for our physical health, too. A few years ago researchers from the University of Utah found there's a price to pay when couples don't exhibit mutuality in marriage. Videotapes recorded 150 husbands and wives discussing sensitive issues (how money is managed or doing household chores) and found that women who buried anger rather than speaking out were more likely to succumb to heart disease than wives who were vocal, the study found. And when women became domineering and controlling, rather than seeking consensus, damage was done to husbands' coronary health.

A British research project yielded remarkably similar results: After a twelve-year study of British civil servants, most of whom were married, English researchers concluded that those with hostile intimate relationships were 34 percent more likely to experience chest pains, heart attacks, and other heart trouble.

Even after typical contributing factors such as obesity, smoking, and drinking were eliminated from the equation, those in troubled relationships were still at 23 percent greater risk for a heart attack. [Source: *"The fine art of marital dispute," The Week (10-19-07), p. 22, "Study ties*

marital strife, heart disease," (Associated Press) Yahoo News (10.08.07), "A Bad Relationship Can Cause Heart Attack: Study," (Reuters) ABCNews.com (10.08.07)]

Advice on Parenting

Paul also has words for children and parents. Again, Paul is an advocate for children, though we don't always acknowledge it. The Ten Commandments lay down the accepted standard: *Honor your father and your mother that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.* This was the Old Testament law, but Paul also speaks directly to parents: *Do not provoke your children, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

In study after study what children say they want most from their parents is two things: 1) more time; and 2) a sense of being important in their lives. They want to spend more time with their parents and be recognized by them.

My great fear is that we do not understand how important these things are in the lives of our children. Parents seem to spend more time shuttling their children from activity to activity without really having significant interaction with them. And when it comes to keeping church a priority, forget it. More and more parents seem to be leaving it up to their children whether or not they will come to church on Sundays. I cannot tell you how often youth sports become the priority for many of our church school families.

Author Richard D. Phillips tells how in 1972, when he was just 12-years-old, his father was sent to Vietnam, and how the only way he and his father could communicate was through letters. He writes:

One of the most powerful memories is the thrill of the letter I would receive from my father almost every week ...He would simply begin by telling me about his life. Not big military issues, but "neat stuff" that happened or that he saw. Then he would talk to me about my life, writing things like this: "Dear Ricky, I heard you had a great baseball game and made a great

catch. Your mother told me how exciting it was when you won. How I wish I could have been there, but I can see you making that catch in my mind." ...

*Do you see what [my dad] was doing? My dad was telling me that I was his boy and that his heart was fully engaged with me, even from halfway around the world ... In the midst of a life-and-death war zone, with all the weighty responsibilities of a senior Army officer, my father was truly absorbed in my life. And I knew it. So when he said to me, in effect, "My son, give me your heart," he had already given every bit of his heart to me, his boy. I couldn't possibly help giving my heart back to him. [Source: Richard D. Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate* (Reformation Trust, 2010), pp. 97-98]*

I fear we have become so busy in our culture that we fail to give them the thing they want and need the most; a relationship with us.

Conclusion

Before I close, I don't want to ignore the fact that Paul has advice for relationships between slave and master. Obviously this does not apply to 21st century America. What we can see is the consistency of Paul's advice in the context in which he wrote. Paul was so certain that the world would end soon that he did not take on the social issue of slavery. Instead, he offers the consistent advice on relationships with which he began, and this would be my closing advice to you.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In all your relationships treat each other with the respect and dignity you would offer to Jesus Christ, and let this be the principle by which you guide everything that you do.