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Submission Explained

Ephesians 5:22-24

Intro: Paul began this section of Ephesians by exhorting believers to imitate God. As daunting as that may sound, Paul goes on to explain how we are to imitate God. We are to imitate those characteristics of God that we possess as children of God. Because God is love, we can imitate Him by walking in love. Because God is light, we can imitate Him by walking in light. Finally, because God is truth and has disseminated this truth to us through His Word and the presence of His Spirit, we can now imitate Him by walking in wisdom.

Paul didn't feel it was necessary to lay out every aspect of walking in wisdom but he does provide 3 specific things believers are to avoid that will assist them in the acquisition and execution of wisdom in their lives. 1st, we're to avoid wasting the time we've been given, using every present opportunity to live for Christ and share the truth about Him. 2nd, we're to avoid foolishness. This doesn't mean cut out the nonsense or stop kidding around. No, in Paul's mind, foolishness for a believer is when their lifestyle fails to reflect an understanding of the Lord's will. To avoid this, we are to strive to understand what God is doing around us right now and then get on board with it wholeheartedly. 3rd, we're to avoid drunkenness, mainly because it impairs the believer's ability to understand what God is doing and inhibits their participation in the Lord's work as well as damages their testimony to the lost souls around them.

Of course, not all of Paul's exhortation to walk in wisdom was negative. As an alternative to drunkenness, Paul says the wise believer is to be filled with, or more literally: controlled by the Spirit. Again, the Spirit is not a substance that we are to be filled with, He's a Person – the 3rd person of the God-head; and He is the controlling influence of God within the believer's life. Paul goes on to describe what the Holy Spirit fills the wise believer with. 1st, they're filled with joy (19); 2nd, they're also filled with thanksgiving (20) and finally, they're filled with a submissive heart (21). These are the 3 characteristics that Paul identifies with the Holy Spirit's filling of the believer.

Now, in v21, Paul doesn't elaborate on the extent or scope of submission

that Spirit-filled believers are to have and this ambiguity has led to some colorful explanations. Some have taken this to imply a sort of symmetrical submission in which every believer is to fully submit to every other believer. This may sound lovely and very fair on paper but what would it look like in practice? Imagine a 4-way stop where everyone insists on being the most polite driver! “You go first.” “No, by all means, you go first!” “No, please, you go!” What you have in this scenario is a lot of pleasantries but no one is getting anywhere! This would be the same result with symmetrical submission – a whole lot of nice talk but nothing would ever get done for the kingdom of Christ.

No, the best description of what Paul is exhorting here is an asymmetrical submission in which believers of any age or position are to submit to those whom God has placed in authority over them. Of course, this doesn’t mean those in authority are left out of the exhortation. As we will see, those God has placed in positions of authority have a duty, a responsibility to care for and serve all those who are under their authority. Thus, by submitting to their God-given responsibilities, there is a sense in which their service is a form of submission towards those they serve.

In a healthy workplace environment, all members of an organization should work towards the benefit and service of all others, but this doesn’t mean all the members have authority over all others. That would be chaotic. Those in leadership must serve those they lead but that doesn’t mean they must submit to them. Their leadership is to be guided and characterized by self-giving love and service, but it is still leadership. It is important that we understand exactly what Paul is speaking about here because the idea of submission will carry us through to the end of this section.

22 – Before we get started, let’s recall that in the first half of this letter, Paul almost exclusively dealt with doctrine. Then, in the second half, he deals with the Christian life – the practical application of all that doctrine. Now, here in the 2nd half of the 2nd half, Paul deals with relationships. In this way he shows us that applied Christianity is never just a matter of the individual believer and God but that it always involves other people. The Spirit-filled life is not to be measured simply by one’s private morality or even by one’s private spiritual experience but by how one conducts themselves with other people. In the section that follows, Paul will address 3 sets of relationships that involve some form of submission: wives to husbands; children to

parents and slaves (employees) to masters (employers). But, while submission is by no means the only element addressed within these relationships, it is the link to the previous passage and the central theme of this passage.

In this selective list of relationships, the 1st set and the one dealt with at greatest length concerns marriage. It's not by accident that Paul deals with marriage first. Marriage has been called "the most valuable institution on earth." It is also the first and foundational institution, which means that all other institutions are in one way or another built upon it. Marriage is the 1st human institution because it was the first relationship between human beings that God created. In Gen 1 we're shown how God created all things and how, after He had created them, He pronounced a blessing upon each, saying, It was good. It was only after He had created man (but before He created woman) that God looked at His creation and found fault with it. God said, It is not good that man should be alone ([Gen 2:18](#)). As a result of this negative evaluation and in answer to the man's aloneness, God created the first woman and brought her to the man, thus performing the first marriage ceremony ([22](#)).

Thus, marriage is the institution from which all other institutions spring. The earliest education was done in the home, as mothers and fathers instructed their children to eat, walk, speak, work, and do many other things. From this basic and natural responsibility have come all formal centers for learning: schools, colleges, universities and other educational organizations. The earliest health care was developed in the home. Then came hospitals, clinics, and hospices. The home was the earliest center of human government. From a father's rightful rule in his home there developed patriarchal, monarchical, and later democratic forms of human rule.

2 important truths follow from this. 1st, if marriage is allowed to decline (as it is doing in our day) then these other institutions will inevitably decline with it. 2nd, whoever contributes to the decline of marriage (as many today are doing), sins against God. Because marriage comes from God and not from man, it involves moral, not just physical, problems. A sin against the commandment of purity is a sin against God, not just the rejection of convention, the thoughtlessness of youth or the evidence of bad taste. Jesus tells us that when God's children are joined in wedlock, they are united by God and behind the strength, courage and love that this divine

direction promises there is also an ominous warning. Those who tamper with God's institution have lit the fuse of divine retribution and justice.

In spite of the importance of marriage as the foundational human institution and the awesome truth that it was God who invented it, marriage is under attack today. The assault waged against marriage is so intense, multifaceted, and insidious that it can't be explained away as simply human dislike for responsibility or even personal selfishness. It is more than human. It's demonic. It's part of that great spiritual warfare being waged against both God and man by His (and our) great enemy the devil. That's why Paul's discussion of marriage occurs precisely where it does in the text: between the urgings toward the Spirit-filled life in [v18-20](#) and the discussion of the Christian soldier's defense against Satan found in [6:10-20](#). It's on the battleground of our relationships that this battle is fought and a lasting victory for God and His righteousness is either lost or won.

Wives, submit – I hope I haven't "triggered" anyone by repeating this but in our current age of cultural enlightenment, many bristle at the mere suggestion of gender-based submission, even in the church. But, it may surprise you to learn that this was not the reaction of the Ephesians when they read Paul's letter. Actually, what Paul is calling for here was so liberating, so freeing, so unheard of that it would've been considered scandalous by the secular cultural standards of the time. The Greco-Roman household code also required wives to submit to their husbands. But unlike these secular expectations, Paul exhorts Spirit-filled wives to submit themselves to their own husbands and they are to do this as to the Lord. These 3 differences point to a higher degree of dignity afforded to Christian wives when compared to Greco-Roman culture. Instead of being a concession to Roman patriarchy, Paul's household code is countercultural (even revolutionary) at its core.

The Greco-Roman household codes go back to Plato and Aristotle, who connected the organization of households to that of the state. Plato argued that the state and the household should be ruled by the stronger, while the weaker (including women) were to be ruled. Aristotle's teaching required that the husband, being superior, was to rule his wife, who was to, in turn, submit to her husband. These assumptions coursed through the veins of 1st century Rome where women were regarded as inferior to men and a wife's obedience to her husband was a natural expression of her inherent

inferiority. There are many other historical examples of this sentiment and while Paul's code may seem to lean in that direction, the nature of his exhortation differs significantly from the assumptions of the day. To begin with, Paul assumes the equality of men and women due to his grounding in the OT. He wasn't influenced or swayed by the derogatory teachings of secular Greek philosophers.

submit – Paul uses the middle voice of the Greek verb here, which implies that wives are to submit themselves to their husbands. Contrary to cultural expectations, a wife's submission is to be a voluntary act of self-yielding. It's not the husband's job to enforce his wife's submission or to subjugate her. Plus, this submission is offered only to her own man, not to men in general. Contrary to the culture of the day where women were generally subjected to men because of the assumption of female inferiority, this is not Paul's instruction. Spirit-filled submission is only to be offered by a wife to her own husband as a loving act of self-yielding. This defines the sphere of a wife's submission.

This voluntary self-yielding is also to be offered to her husband as to the Lord. This defines the motive of a wife's submission. This doesn't mean the wife is to offer equal devotion and submission to both, as though her submission to Christ is her submission to her husband. This would be a recipe for abuse as the husband could claim absolute authority. Instead, as to the Lord provides a parallel example, not parallel authority. Just as it's appropriate for the church to submit to Christ, so it's appropriate for wives to submit to their husbands. Yet, this still associates a wife's voluntary self-yielding to her devotion to Christ. It's an expression of her Christian commitment. She's not to do this just for her husband but to do it primarily for the Lord Himself, for His sake, because He exhorts you to and because it is well-pleasing in His sight when you do it. It's part of your Christian behavior; it's part of your discipleship.

23 – Paul doesn't just exhort wives to submission; he also provides valid reasons for doing so. The 1st reason is seen in **v22** - as to the Lord. This means that the motive of her submission must be obedience and respect for Jesus rather than obedience and respect for her husband. The 2nd reason is given here: because the husband is head of the wife. In its fullest sense, the word head carries the ideas of source and authority. It means to possess the appropriate responsibility to lead and the matching accountability. It is

right and appropriate to submit to one who is our head.

When you look at the Biblical idea of headship in other passages such as **I Cor 11** and **I Tim 3**, the emphasis is put constantly on the fact that the man was created first, not the woman. So there is a priority by creation for man. The Bible also emphasizes the fact that woman was made out of man (source), taken out of man to show a connection to him and she was meant to be a help for man, a help that was fitting for him. Man was also made to rule over creation (have dominion). Man was given authority over the animals; in fact, man was given the authority to name them. This shows that man was put into a position of leadership, lordship, authority and power.

I Cor 11:7-10 makes the point that God created Adam first, and gave him responsibility over Eve. This happened before the fall. Thus, this passage makes it clear that before and after the fall, God ordained that there be different roles between husbands and wives. These differences in roles are not the result of the fall and they are not erased by our new life in Christ. The woman is different; she is the complement of the man. What the Bible does prohibit is that the woman should seek to be manly, to behave as a man; or that a woman should seek to usurp the place, the position or the authority that has been given to man by God Himself. Paul's merely exhorting his readers to realize what God has already ordained. Remember: wisdom is recognizing what God is doing and getting on board with it.

Paul presents a 3rd reason for a Christian wife's submission to her husband in the 2nd part of the verse. She should submit because the relationship of the husband and wife is a model of the union between Jesus and the church. In the relationship between Christ and the Church, the headship of Jesus is unquestioned. So also, the husband is the head of the team that is the one-flesh relationship of husband and wife. Maybe the Christian wife doesn't want a head or leader of the team. If that's the case, then the wife doesn't understand Biblical marriage and will always work against it in one way or another. It'd be the same thing as a Christian saying he doesn't want Jesus to be his head.

Paul goes on to say point out that Jesus is also the Savior of the body. This means more than just salvation as you must already be saved before you become part of the body of Christ. We should understand this to simply mean preserver. Jesus preserves the body and blesses it with good things

from above. It's in this way that husbands are to be their wife's savior (preserver). Just like the Church, the wife is to be kept, preserved, guarded, shielded and provided for by her husband. That's the relationship – as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church, so the husband is to nourish and cherish the wife.

24 – Therefore – A Christian wife should submit to her husband because: it is part of her obedience to Jesus (22b); it is appropriate to the order of creation (23a); it is appropriate because of the model of the relationship between Jesus and the Church (23b). Now, if Paul had stopped at this verse, as we will, then it would be easy for a Christian wife to feel that all the obligations were on her. Thankfully, Paul goes on to reveal what obligations the Christian husband has in the marriage relationship. But, the Christian wife still has her obligations.

Both husband and wife are called to die to self – submission is the way the wife does it. Both are called to sacrifice – submission is the way the wife does it. Both are called to see their marriage as a model of Jesus' relationship with the church – submission is how the wife honors that model. Both are called to honor the order of creation – submission is the way the wife fulfills her place in that order.

in everything – Does Paul literally mean everything? This should be understood in the same way we understand submission in other spheres. There are limits to the submission your employer can expect of you. There are limits to the submission the government can expect of you. There are even limits to the submission parents can expect of their children. In no place does the Bible teach an unqualified, without exception, submission – except to God and God alone. To violate this is equal to committing the sin of idolatry.

Thus, there are limits to a wife's submission to her husband like if he asks or expects her to sin; if he's medically incapacitated, or physically abusive and endangering the safety of her or her children. Clearly, there are limits. It's more likely that in everything refers to all areas of life. Meaning, this is not to be a submission only in spiritual matters as if wives could divide their lives into the sacred and secular and only submit to their husband's spiritual leadership. This would be impossible, of course, because in the Christian life, no such division exists. Likewise, wives are not to submit to their

husbands only in areas where he knows more than she does (logical) or in areas which she agrees with him (in concord). The phrase in everything points to the holistic nature of the wife's submission: it's supposed to be comprehensive, not piecemeal. This is a universal instruction; applicable regardless of time, place or culture.

Marriage is a one flesh relationship made up of 2 equal but different parties; both are equal in importance before God and both have different (complementary) God-ordained roles that are essential for an effective working relationship. The initiative and leadership of the team is ultimately the husband's but the action of the team must be coordinated. Neither party should act independently of the other, by running ahead or by stalling to delay action. The action is to be coordinated but with leadership in the head. There is no sense of inferiority suggested by this. The wife is not inferior to the husband, her role is just different. 😊