

Read also Genesis 2:20-24, Proverbs 31

A mild mannered husband was tired of being bossed by his wife so he went to see a psychiatrist. The doctor said he needed more self-esteem, so he gave him a book on assertiveness which the man read on the way home on the bus. He finished the book before arriving home.

The husband stormed into the house. Pointing his finger at his wife said, "From now on, I want you to know that I am the man of the house and my word is law! I want you to prepare my supper tonight, including dessert. Then, you're going to draw my bath so I can relax. When I am finished with my bath, guess who's going to dress me and comb my hair?"

The wife looked him in the eye and replied, "The funeral director."

How else do you introduce the topic of submission in 2011? To hear what the Bible has to say about this topic we need to see what has been said across the ages. And if you think we have a problem with the concept of submission, I assure you, people in Bible times had more of a problem with it, only in the reverse.

In Old Testament times society was patriarchal; yet Scripture shows relationships were built by God to meet emotional needs. The first man was lonely and that was not good in God's eyes. God was concerned about Adam's need for companionship and love.

God also believes in unity and partnership between men and women – not just her being there to meet his needs (the word "helper" is often misinterpreted to mean this). The Proverbs passage talks about the collaborative effort of both men and women for the family's wellbeing. Both of them had a vital role in its success. Each person contributes according to their skills and gifts.

But as you know, we find ourselves in a culture which shapes us all, believer and unbeliever. Relevant topics in the culture become relevant topics in the church. It was that way in the first century. Rather than resist this, we should strive to understand God's view within that context. We can be grateful God has a view and God desires for us to be shaped by it.

The words written in Ephesians must be understood in light of first century Greco-Roman culture. Lucky for us, plenty of writers wrote about it.

First, one third of the population of Greece and Italy was enslaved. This appalls us, but slavery was the norm. There was no thought of abolition.

So let's divide men, women, and children into equal groups. Looking at this chart, then, you will see how many lived with subservience and thought nothing unusual of it.

Secondly, let's hear some writings about the position of women in first century Greco-Roman culture. Josephus, a Jewish historian wrote:

"The woman is in all things inferior to the man. Let her be obedient, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for God has given authority to the man."

Now listen to the famous Greek philosopher, Philo:

“Wives must be in servitude to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things.”

We call for equal opportunity for women now; to them servitude was the norm.

As for children, society was such that the father had absolute legal power. Dionysius writes, “The law-giver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains, and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death; and this even though the son was already engaged in public affairs” (i.e., grown).

Wow, imagine introducing that concept into a parenting class today.

Philo said, “Parents are to their children what God is in the world.”

The father had the authority to decide on the life and death of his newborn children. Handicapped children could be killed, and unwanted daughters were often exposed or sold. He could sell sons. If they then gained their freedom, he could sell them again. According to Dionysius, “not to adhere to this proper hierarchy is detrimental not only to the household but also to the life of the state.”

The jurist Gaius wrote, “The power which we have over our children is peculiar to Roman citizens and is found in no other nation.”

The mother, on the other hand, had no legal power.

Guys, are you thinking you were born in the wrong century?

So you have one third of society which is subservient through slavery, and then all women and children are in subservient positions, leaving 7/9ths of the population under the control of 2/9ths of the men. That is the climate in which Ephesians was written.

Do you find that climate offensive? Let it challenge you, so that you can truly understand what Ephesians says. You cannot understand what submission is all about when you look at it only through the lens of the 21st century. You must understand their NORMAL.

Now let’s listen to the passage. Listen for the tone, compared to that culture.

READ: Ephesians 5:21-33

Okay, husbands, you are the chief. You are the leader, the authority to whom the others look. How are you to lead? What is the tone of the letter, especially compared to their culture?

God says, “Lead from love, like Jesus.” Be countercultural within the culture.

Jesus did not grasp heavenly authority or power. He could have. But Jesus emptied Himself, living to serve. He did this out of huge love for us, giving Himself up for us. His love for us is so great He is intent upon teaching us to be one with Him, holy, humble, and unblemished.

That's a far cry from ruling over others from a position of paternal authority like Greco-Roman culture.

But how does it compare to our culture? How much do you hear counsel that says, "Love her like your own body?" Guys, assess yourselves. How are you doing?

Wives, it says, "Submit to your husband as to the Lord."

Ladies, it doesn't give details, exceptions, or disclaimers. Submit only if he perfectly fulfills his part... Submit only if he is a knight in shining armor . . .

But, you are to realize he is the head, appointed by God – Hopefully you consulted God when you picked him, and he was a good candidate. The problem is too many women pick someone who has no love for God, thinking they can remake him.

Wives, submit "as to the Lord." The goal is to please God.

God knows this is hard. So He says to both husbands and wives, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

How is the tone compared to Josephus and Philo? This was radical stuff to the culture, and it is radical to our culture.

Now, let's read about children. READ Ephesians 6:1-4

The first difference is both parents are to be obeyed, not just the father.

Then God addresses fathers in the area of anger. Authority is easily abused, and anger leaves scars when children are brought up with a steady diet of it. Colossians says don't do it "lest they become discouraged."

Ephesians says instead, focus on training them in the faith for that will help them be mature, stable, and strong. This instruction is given in both Testaments and is extremely important. That is why the congregation promises to teach them when we baptize children.

Now for slaves. Think of this in terms of the employee-boss relationships and it will be relevant. READ Ephesians 6:5-9

Notice the Bible works in and through the culture, judging how we are to be in everyday life. You are to work as if you were working for Christ Jesus, and if you are in authority over someone, you are to treat them not with anger and threats, but as your equal before the Lord.

What is the overall attitude here? Work for the Lord, wherever you are – enthusiastically. Subdue anger. Remember that when you honor God and take God's ways to heart, He will reward you for the good you do.

God's way is mutual submission because God loves you and wants you to treat each other the best. This transcends culture. Love and reverence Him and that love will flow over, bringing joy and blessing to your relationships.

AMEN