

God in Our Relationships

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome everyone. It is great to be here again, isn't it? To be able to worship God and to be ready now to listen to his word and what he has to say to us. I confess when I was asked to speak on the verses that we're about to read in Ephesians chapter 5, I did look and think, oh dear, this is quite tricky. We're going to be looking at teaching about husbands and wives, about children and parents and about slaves and masters. So we've gone from all of the wonderful teaching at the start of Ephesians about all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ and how it is that we can be part of God's family and know absolute acceptance and forgiveness through to the last couple of weeks where we've had some really hard-hitting teaching about how God now expects his children, those who are part of his family to live. And now we come on to this further really practical teaching about human relationships. And as I've prepared this week, the overarching question in my mind and the question that I'd like us to reflect on is this. What difference has being a follower of

Jesus made this week in our relationships? Because I think that what you'll see time and time again as we read these passages and as we think about them is that what it presents to us is a picture of a people following Jesus and as a result their relationships look radically different to what they might otherwise have been. So let's reflect on that as we go to read. But I do also want to say that I think there are two important things to bear in mind that have been in my mind as I've come to think about this. First is that as we read it, we do need to recognize that 2,000 years ago, 2,000 years later, there are some very different factors of our culture which are relevant. I'm not saying for a minute that we can in any way disregard any of this teaching. We mustn't. We believe this is God's inspired word. But there are important differences in culture which can make some of these passages seem quite difficult. So the most obvious example here is that Paul talks about slaves and he makes no comment on whether or not it was right that there was slavery. Okay? And I think that what we're seeing here is that he's speaking into the circumstances that pertained in that church in Ephesus where it would be unimaginable to have anything other than a system of masters and slaves.

And so we need to look at that, not see it as an endorsement of a system of slavery. I think it certainly does not constitute any endorsement of that, but as teaching that is spoken into that situation and teaching for masters and slaves. And I think we can readily see there that there is relevant teaching for the workplace, for all those of us who are in or are contemplating being in the workplace.

And I think the second really important bit of culture to understand is the way in which women would have been treated in the circumstances that Paul was writing into. And it's when we understand that, we see that what Paul has to say about husbands and wives is absolutely radical and counter-cultural.

Because in those days under Roman law, women were treated as basically part of the man's property. Okay? Women had almost no rights of their own. So the man was in charge of everything and women, children and slaves were the property of the man. So can we bear in mind that bit of, that important bit of culture as we read this. So culture, I think, is important. And secondly, our own personal experiences are also relevant as we read this passage. Why do I say that? I am so conscious that as we read these passages of scripture, it is easy for us to feel condemned or judged or failures. Because we reflect on our own childhoods, our own experience of being a parent, or in some cases, the marriages that we've either been in or have experienced. And so my prayer is, as we look at this passage of God's words, the grace of Jesus Christ is what will be seen most clearly. And all of us will be left with a sense of hope and a sense of the difference that Jesus can make in every single relationship in our life from this point forward. Okay? Rather than reflecting primarily on the failures that may have been in the past, because we're so conscious of

the sin and failure that does indeed surround us. So with that, by way of introduction, let's get stuck in and read these verses together. We're in Ephesians chapter 5, and we're starting in verse 21, and it says this. Paul says,

[5 : 13] Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body just as Christ does the church, for we are members of his body. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself and the wife must respect her husband. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy a long life on earth. Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. And may God bless his word to us this morning. I want to give you a very quick overview of what I think are eight of the different categories of relationships which are caught up here, and then we're going to delve into a couple of them in a bit more detail, and we'll see how many of them we can get through. So first of all, I think it's important that we see in this passage teaching for every single one of us about what being a Christian actually means. This is a starting point here, because this is very clearly teaching that's given into a context where people are already seeking to follow Jesus. So verse 22, wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as you do to the Lord.

I'd like just to reflect on that. Not focus so much on the wives bit, but submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord. So you see that Paul's speaking to people, he's saying, first and foremost, you are people who have chosen to submit yourselves to the Lord. And I think that's a lovely description of what being a Christian actually means. So I want to just offer you that at the start. If you're thinking about what is it that being a Christian actually means, somebody who has submitted themselves to the Lord, somebody who said, Lord, you're the ruler, you're the king, you're the saviour, and my life is yours, and I am submitted to you. I wonder if that's a description of us. First of all, teaching for all of us about what being a Christian means. Secondly, teaching about what being part of a church means, and teaching indeed about how God sees the church. So the church is described here in the most magnificent of terms, and I think our opening video caught some of that really nicely. So we're told that being part of a church means we're part of a glorious body. We're being made perfect, clean, holy, and blameless. That is, we read that Jesus died for the church in order that we might be holy and clean, in order that ultimately we might be without any spot or wrinkle. And let's just reflect for a minute on the privilege of being part of this body of Jesus Christ. We are part of this body described here as the bride for which Jesus Christ laid down his life. Why? In order that we might be pure, in order that we might be holy, in order that we might be clean, in order that we might be without any spot or wrinkle, and one day might be presented to Jesus, our Savior, as an absolutely glorious bride for Jesus Christ. Important teaching about the church, and how might that impact on our attitudes to one another in the church here? If we focus primarily on this local expression of the church, and indeed on our attitudes to other Christians who, while not part of this church, are part of the global church, this global, beautiful, albeit still full of fault, body of Christ that he is making clean and making pure, in order one day to present, to be presented to himself spotless.

I wonder if our response to that is to say, Jesus, you are in charge of all that goes on in this place. We are yours. Mould us, shape us, increasingly transform us, so that we might indeed be a fitting bride for you, Jesus Christ. Glorious stuff about the church. There's teaching number three for Christian homes. And we see that as we look at a combination of husbands, wives, children, and the key point that I take about from there is that God cares, firstly, about what goes on in our homes, right? What goes on in our homes isn't of lesser importance than what takes place in the church.

With God, it's all part of this one transformation that he's working in our lives. He cares about what's going on in our homes. And secondly, what's going on in our homes is intended to serve as an example to others of the work that he's doing in our lives and in the world. Fourthly, teaching for men and husbands.

[12:15] God has high expectations of all of us men in terms of how we will act as men. And that applies, I would say, whether or not we are husbands. And we're going to come back to that. Fifthly, teaching for women and wives.

God wants you to have high expectations of the men who are around you and also wants you to rejoice in all that he has done for you. Sixthly, teaching for children. One of the Ten Commandments, which Jesus makes clear is every bit as applicable nowadays as it was when it was first given.

Number seven, teaching for parents. Don't frustrate your kids. This is tricky stuff, isn't it? I've already frustrated my son today. He whispered to me as I was trying to sing, Daddy, you're giving me a sore ear.

So there we go. How can we manage not to frustrate our kids? But there's teaching for parents. And then finally, teaching for the workplace. I don't know if we're going to have long to look at this, but it seems to me that the key teaching for us in the workplace is don't be a skiver, because God is actually looking at you in the workplace and work as though you are working to God. I like the word skiver. I thought it was Scottish, but apparently it's not. It's actually from the French. Aileen, you may know this through your time in Brussels. From the French, esquive, which means to slink away.

Okay, isn't that quite powerful? You know, that's maybe the temptation of a lot of us in the workplace. Just get by doing as little as possible. Just esquive, just slink away. No, we're told here in the workplace, work as though you are working to the Lord. And then for those who might have a management responsibility, we're told, remember bosses, that God shows no favoritism. Remember bosses, that everyone stands on a level playing field before the maker of all of mankind. Remember that you came to earth with nothing and that you will leave earth with nothing. And as a result, treat everyone with fairness and respect. What incredibly impactful teaching in those eight different facets of life and relationship that this passage has to speak to us about. And I'd encourage you to look at it in more detail. But I want to turn for a few minutes now specifically to the teaching that this passage has got, first of all, for the men. Dan and Bethany Lansaw lived in Missouri, a young couple, only six years married. And only two or so years ago, tragedy hit their town in Missouri, as with so many other places in America. A tornado hit their home. And their home was caught up in the very epicenter of that tornado. And you can only imagine, can't you, the devastation as those swirling winds caused even the foundations of their house and the bricks and all of their possessions to start swirling round about them. What was Dan's response as the husband of Bethany Lansaw?

[15:38] It was to throw himself on top of his wife in order to try and save her from the swirling debris that risked her. He took a pillow, he threw it over her head, he threw the rest of his body over her.

She didn't fight it. She allowed him to protect her. And as the winds died down, she looked to see if she could rescue him. But it was too late. He had died in that swirling tornado.

He had given his life in order to rescue her. She says, in her words, he got on top of me to take the brunt of most of it. And he's my hero. I mean, the house was ripping apart. It all happened so fast. All the pillows were flying off us. The only thing I could do was keep one in front of my face. There is an example of a man who I think demonstrated the sort of love which men here are told that they are expected to demonstrate. Let's look at it again in verse 25.

Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Verse 28, in the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. Verse 33, each one of you

must love his wife as he loves himself and the wife must respect her husband. There's an awful lot more here in terms of volume about the men and the husbands than there is about the wives. And what an incredible challenge there is to all of us as men and husbands as to how God would expect us to show love to our wives and indeed love to others. Can we take Jesus as our role model? Men, there is no higher standard and there is no more difficult calling, I guess, than to accept this challenge, that he is our ultimate role model. He's not bossy. He's certainly not bullying. He's strong, he's tender and he's loving.

As I think of Jesus as the role model, we think of him laying down his life on the cross. He didn't need to but he chose to because of his love for us. And I think of some of the other incidents where we look at Jesus, think of him in John 21, just a little bit after his resurrection, where what does he do?

[18 : 34] He recognizes his disciples in their fear and in their uncertainty. And he goes along to that beach and he doesn't just preach at them. He provides breakfast for them by the fire. And we could look at 101 other examples of Jesus as the model that we are expected to emulate as men. What a contrast to what we are seeing so often in the world around us. Elizabeth and I were shocked a few weeks ago to be waiting at the traffic lights in Kirkliston. And we saw a bit of an altercation going on outside a car.

And suddenly the guy got out of his car and just started to thump and punch this other individual until he was lying sprawled on the pavement outside the cash machine. And as he struggled to get up, he continued to be punched and thumped by this other individual. And as I've looked at this passage and seen this model of what a man and a husband is meant to be like, Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church, giving himself up for her.

I think how skewed is our image at times of power and strength and authority that might be associated with what men are sometimes about. And here instead we have an example of sacrifice. of the ultimate in love and commitment. Rabbi Zacharias, writing in a book about marriage, says this, love is a commitment that will be tested in the most vulnerable areas of spirituality.

A commitment that will force you to make some very difficult choices. It is a commitment that demands that you deal with your lust, your greed, your pride, your power, your desire for control, your temper, your patience, and every area of temptation that the Bible clearly talks about.

[20 : 49] It demands the quality of commitment that Jesus demonstrates in his relationship to us. You'll see why I said at the beginning that my aim is not that we all go out feeling like miserable failures. Because I absolutely know if I look at myself and my own commitment and my own love that I see how far short I fall. But this is the gold standard that is presented for us men, which can only be achieved through grace, which can only be achieved as we bask in all that the Lord Jesus has done for us. But nonetheless, we cannot shirk it. We are told that the standard is that we might display the quality of commitment that Jesus demonstrates in his relationship to us. Maybe some of us are thinking, you don't know how difficult it is in the relationships that I am in. I was struck by this comment from Timothy Keller in his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*. He says this,

Jesus loved us, not because we were lovely to him, but to make us lovely. That is why I am going to love my spouse, he says. Speak to your heart like that, and then fulfill the promises you made on your wedding day. Now, I'm not going to suggest that any of you might be finding your husband or wife difficult or hard to love, far be it from me to go into that area at all, certainly not in presence company. But nonetheless, look at this passage, this quote rather, and just let it sink in. He loved us, not because we were lovely, but to make us lovely. Do we desire that through our love for our spouse, they might know that it doesn't matter what they've done, doesn't matter about the times where they might not be being lovely. We're going to love because Jesus is our standard, and he died, not because we are lovely, but to make us lovely. I think there's a wee challenge for men, just before I take the focus away from men, around how we view ourselves here as well. I don't want to make too much of this, but you'll do see that in the same way as we're told that husbands have to love their wives in the same way as Christ loved the church, verse 28 says, husbands must love their wives as their own bodies. And then 33, each of you must love your wife as you love yourself, and the wife must respect your husband. So I don't think it's stretching it to say that there is a challenge here around how we men view ourselves. I think there is a challenge here around some healthy, not pride, but a recognition of who we are in Christ, a recognition that we are deeply loved, that we are absolutely forgiven, that we are not held back by our past, that we have a glorious future ahead of us. And as a result, we will have, can I describe it as a healthy self-respect through what

Jesus has done in our lives? And as a result of that, we will be better able to love our wives. What about the wives? The bit of the passage that's perhaps the most seemingly counter-cultural when we read it first of all. Can I suggest there are three really important things to get our heads around in the teaching to wives in order to properly understand this, what seems a strange instruction in verse 22, wives, submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. Firstly, wives, it says, you have submitted to the Lord. So it's absolutely clear this is teaching given to Christian women, women who have experienced what it is to say to Jesus, Jesus, you're in control, you come first.

And wives, you've seen the blessing that that brings. You've seen the blessing of submission to Jesus Christ. You've seen that it brings security, freedom, and a knowledge that you are loved. Secondly, wives, you're part of a church that submits to Christ, its head, and crucially, your husband is also part of a church that is submitting to Christ as its head. And indeed, in verse 21, you're submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ. So not only have you personally, wives, submitted to Christ, you're part of a community, and your husband is also part of this community of mutual submission, mutual submission to Christ, and indeed, mutual submission, verse 21, to one another out of reverence for Christ. And thirdly, wives, you're married to someone who is seeking to love you with the same sort of love that Jesus himself displayed as he laid down his life for you on the cross. Aren't those three really important facts that help us understand why it perhaps makes absolute sense for the instruction which is then given, which says, wives, would you now voluntarily and freely submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord? And in this glorious act of mutual submission to one another, would you allow him to love you? Would you allow him to support you? Would you allow him to provide guidance? Would you respect rather than undermine? I think we should be absolutely clear from the context that this is not a license for any sort of machoism or male dominance. Absolutely not. It's a tough challenge for both men and women with clear instructions given to both. And I hope that for some of us there might be something that we can take on board from that really practically as we reflect on the differences that being a follower of Jesus Christ makes in our every relationship.

I want to go back to one of the verses just as we come towards a close earlier on in Ephesians, as we perhaps reflect on the relationships that we are in. And it's Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10, and it says this, for we are God's workmanship, or other verses will say we are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

[27 : 53] We're God's masterpieces. God has created us anew in Christ Jesus so that we can do the good things he planned for us. We're God's masterpieces. And as such, he wants his glory and goodness to be displayed in every single aspect of life. Our relationships between husband and wife, relationships between parents and children, and relationships in the workplace.

we're going to close with just a moment to reflect on what our relationships look like. And let's invite him to work in every one of them in order that his glory might increasingly be displayed. Let's pause and then pray.

Lord Jesus, we ask that being part of your church might be something which fills us with thankfulness, with awe, and with wonder. We are part of this body for which you have died. And first and foremost, we ask, Lord Jesus, that in response, we might be people individually, and we might be families that voluntarily submit ourselves to you.

in the days ahead, this day, help us to increasingly live out what it means to be people, communities, and families that are submitted to you.

[29 : 51] And may we reflect your glory in all of our relationships, so that others might see more of your love and more of your grace in and through us.

Help those of us who feel that our lives have been deeply marked and scarred by relationships which did not reflect anything of the love that Jesus demonstrated to us.

Help those even here whose backgrounds might be marked by abuse, by loss, by the absence of a parent or a partner.

Help each one of us to turn to you, Lord Jesus, to look again at your love, at your sacrifice, at your grace. And may you be our model and example going forward.

And may you heal us from the negative experiences and examples that we have had in the past.

Some of us look at our own lives, and we see where we too have fallen greatly short from the example that you would challenge us to pursue through the passage of Scripture that we've been looking at.

[31 : 21] And by your grace, would you help us to know forgiveness from the past and renewed hope as we submit ourselves to you, Lord Jesus, and take our place in this glorious church, the bride of Jesus Christ, recognizing that you are making us holy and pure.

So we worship you and we look to you for help in this crucial area of life, Lord Jesus. Amen.