

**“Be Subject to One Another”**  
**Sermon Series on**  
***Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For***  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**February 28, 2016**  
**(Eph. 5:1,2,15-21)**

**Introduction.**

During my first year of marriage women’s rights was at the forefront of the national debate in this country, and the feminist movement was at its height. During that year, Lorie signed up for a women’s Bible study at the church in north Georgia where I was serving as a seminary intern. Over the course of that year Lorie’s small group decided to study a little book whose title alone provoked a reaction. It was entitled *Me? Obey Him?*

The book presented a rather simplistic interpretation of traditional roles in marriage, and it had a very narrow approach to submission. One line in particular struck home. It read, “Listen to the voice of your husband as if the Lord Himself had spoken.” That whole idea didn’t go over so well in my home. Lorie has questioned on many occasions whether or not I had the mind and voice of Christ, and rightly so, I might add! I’ve even questioned myself sometimes!

Over the course of that first year we were married, Lorie and I learned that mutual submission, in marriage or in any other relationship for that matter, is much more complex and challenging than any simple formula can suggest. That is the subject of the next mutuality command we consider today in our sermon series on *Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For – be subject to one another.*

**I. The Challenge of Submission.**

In his book *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser writes, “Of all the mutuality commands, this one is perhaps the most difficult to understand and obey because it runs so contrary to modern values. Americans insist on defending their personal rights and securing or maintaining their social privileges, which makes the idea of subjection both foreign to our thinking and offensive to our cultural sensibilities. It appears to reinforce the power of those who already have too much and to keep the powerless in a place of subordination.”<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever played one of those word association games in which someone says a word and you say the first thing that comes to mind? Well, what’s the first thing you think of when you hear the word *submission*? Is it positive or negative? In our culture, *submission* is a word that often incites controversy, and most people don’t have a very positive image when they hear it.

I believe one of the main reasons for this strong emotional response is because for many people the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word “submission” are words such as *inferior*, *doormat*, or *controlled*. I know that response personally. There was a time in my own life when the word *submission* conjured up negative memories from my childhood growing up, or ways I wanted to rebel against authority when I was a young man.

I grew up in the 1960s during which young people wanted to throw off the restraints of what we perceived were the shackles of authority. I came of age during the Watergate hearings, and we learned not to trust people who were in charge. When I was in high school, I actually had a poster on the wall of my bedroom that said, “Don’t trust anyone over 30!” My generation wasn’t going to submit to anyone if we could help it.

But then I became a Christian, and as I began to study the Bible I learned that submission isn’t a bad word. It’s actually part of God’s design not only to establish order in the church and in the world but also to help people thrive and flourish as human beings.

I also discovered that life is a matter of where you stand by faith. If you aren’t confident of what Christ has done for you and you don’t trust in His sovereignty and his unconditional love, then you will view Ephesians 5:21 as a threat or a burdensome command that robs you of your freedom. However, if you’re confident of the blessings you have in Christ and truly believe that God is the sovereign Lord of the universe and that He is *for* you and has your best interest in mind, then you will begin to understand that submitting to one another is an invitation to live a life that is free from all the trappings of the power struggles of this world and the pecking order that is far too important to everyone all too often.

## **II. The Call to Submission.**

Jerry Sittser writes that mutual submission is God’s way of nurturing harmony in a discordant world, unity in broken relationships, healing in a sick society, and love in a divided church. He says that it’s applicable to imperfect people like you and me who belong to imperfect families, work in imperfect jobs, participate in imperfect organizations, belong to imperfect churches, and live in an imperfect world. It shows us how to function in communities that have tension and conflict running through them, and mutual submission takes the world as it is, not as we want or expect it to be.<sup>2</sup>

The Greek word for “submit” is the word *hupotasso*, and it actually combines two Greek words – *hupo* which means “under” and *tasso* which means “to arrange in order,” or “to assign.” So, to submit means to be *under assignment*. It implies

that we choose to order our lives under the circumstances, relationships, and roles in which we find ourselves and in which God has put us.

The three English words that are used to translate the Greek in this passage – “subject,” “submit,” and “subordinate” – all begin with the prefix *sub*, which means “to be under.” So to be subject to one another implies that we acknowledge the necessity of a social order and we accept our place in it and under the authority of others. But it also means that we actually transform the social order in which we find ourselves through the power of radical obedience and sacrificial love.

Some people believe that this passage in Ephesians 5:21-6:10 that teaches about mutual submission, and covers the topics of husbands and wives in marriage, parents and children in the family, and servants and masters in the workplace, seems excessively conservative and out-of-date to us now. But they fail to realize just how radical this command was in Paul’s day, and, in fact, still is today. Jerry Sittser points out that there are four features in Paul’s writing in Ephesians 5-6 that set his teaching apart as both radical and relevant.

*First*, the command is addressed to everyone. Paul says that those who occupy dominant positions in the social order are also to be subject to their subordinates, and they are supposed to order their lives under the very people over whom they exercise authority. That’s a radical idea.

*Second*, how we respond to this command depends upon the particular position we occupy within the social order. There is a differentiation based upon the roles each of us has been assigned by God. And though the command is universal, the application of it is particular. However, from what Paul says in these verses the greater responsibility appears to be imposed on those who occupy the dominant positions, not the other way around.

*Third*, mutual submission is designed to correct the natural abuses that tend to occur within the social order, although without abolishing the order itself. Husbands are to be sacrificial in their love for their wives, parents aren’t supposed to exasperate their children, and masters are to treat their servants with mutual respect knowing that both they and their servant will one day answer to God who is Master over all.

*Finally*, all believers are to be subject to one other “*out of reverence for Christ*” as unto the Lord. It is true that submission puts our rights and privileges at risk, but our subjection is ultimately to Jesus Christ, and not to any human being or institution. And God can be trusted to look out for us if we’re willing to sacrifice for Him. Therefore, since Jesus is Lord over all, we can never use our circumstances as an excuse not to live a life of submission.

### **III. The Model of Submission.**

The Trinitarian character of God serves as the model for all mutual submission, and in Jesus in particular we see a picture of what submission is supposed to look like. In the Trinity we see the three Persons of the Godhead in mutual submission to one another. Father, Son and Holy Spirit form a community of mutual love and respect that results in mutual submission. Each Person has a different role to play, and from what we read in the Bible neither Person of the Trinity ever seems to be worked up about who's in charge or who gets the credit.

Jesus the Son declared that He came to earth in order to do the will of His heavenly Father. At Jesus' baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration the Father affirmed His Son and declared that with Him He was well pleased. And as the Nicene Creed says, the Holy Spirit came from the Father and the Son, and together with the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified. The communitarian mutual submission of the three Persons of the Trinity is a model for the church of Jesus Christ, and you and I are invited to participate through Christ in this holy relationship of love and mutual subjection.

It's a fascinating exercise to study the life of Christ and delve into this whole idea more deeply. In the New Testament Jesus is presented as both the Lord of the universe and the creator of all things, while at the same time He was also the Suffering Servant whose sacrificial death on the cross accomplished our salvation.

Philippians 2 is a classic passage which tries to explain this profound mystery of the Incarnation. In that passage the apostle Paul says that though Jesus was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, He emptied Himself, taking on the form of a slave, and was born in human likeness.

And after being found in human form, Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. And following His radical sacrifice of submission on behalf of broken humanity, God raised Jesus from the dead and has now highly exalted Him. And He has given Jesus the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus ever knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

Christ left the splendor of heaven to live among us on earth and to be the visible expression of the living God, and He came to teach us the ways of the Kingdom. He washed the disciples' feet, and He insisted that the person who wanted to be great in the Kingdom must be willing to be a servant of all. Jesus challenged the notion that leadership meant you were the person on top of the pecking order, and He used a child as an example of the kind of person every disciple should aspire to be. Then He died on the cross for our sins and mine, and Christ made the ultimate sacrifice. He loved us to the very end.

To refuse the call to mutual submission is to deny the example Jesus has shown us and to suggest that we know better than Him. Jesus set an example for us to imitate, and we're invited to follow in His footsteps. True freedom in Christ is found in submission and service, and you and I will never be able to exercise authority in our world in the right way until we learn what mutual submission is all about.

### **Conclusion.**

Are there limits to submission? Yes, there are. We see examples of this in Scripture with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3 when they refused to bow down and worship the image of the king. The apostles Peter and John had a similar experience in the book of Acts when they disobeyed the Sanhedrin's order to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. And even Christ Himself challenged the Jewish religious establishment of His day. There are times when our commitment to the authority of God in our lives supersedes our submission to the person in authority.

However, most of us aren't in situations in which we have to choose between submitting to a person in authority and submitting to God. Usually our struggle is a more personal one, and it often involves a problem with pride. The question is are we willing to accept the authority of the people God has placed in our lives over us, and are we willing to mutually submit to one another out of our reverence for Christ when we are in positions of leadership. The choice is ours.

Think about someone who is in authority over you, and it's difficult to follow their lead. How does God want you to submit to them as you submit to Christ? In what ways is God calling you to submit to their office even if they are hard to follow? These are the growing edges of discipleship for most of us, and mutual submission is never easy for people who value their freedom. Pride keeps us from doing what we know we ought to, but Christ calls us to sacrifice our pride and to live in submission to others.

In addition, think about a person in your life over whom you have some authority. It might be a spouse, or a child, or a student, or a co-worker. Maybe it's a team of people. How will you use your leadership and the authority God has given you in redemptive ways in the coming week? What does mutual submission mean for your life today?

In her magnificent book *Team of Rivals*, presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin tells the remarkable story of how, after he was elected President, Abraham Lincoln appointed the men he defeated in the election and people who were the most critical of him to be on his cabinet. William Seward became secretary of state, Salmon Chase secretary of the treasury, and Edward Bates attorney general.

The remaining top posts were given to three former Democrats – Gideon Welles as secretary of the navy, Montgomery Blair postmaster general, and Edwin Stanton secretary of war. Every member of Lincoln’s cabinet was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than he was. Their presence in the cabinet might have threatened to eclipse the obscure prairie lawyer from Springfield, Illinois.

However, it soon became clear that Abraham Lincoln would emerge as the undisputed captain of this most unusual cabinet, and through his strength and his humility Lincoln was able to forge this team of rivals into a group of people who together would change the course of American history. And it all began with mutual submission.

Mutual submission is the first sign of the road to redemption. When God begins to transform our minds and hearts, it shows up in our human relationships. We become willing to sacrifice our pride and ego and to cultivate a humble heart, and we no longer have to be in charge or the person on top.

Lorie and I still laugh about the book I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon. Looking back over 37 years of marriage, there were only two occasions when Lorie and I reached an impasse and we couldn’t find a compromise together involving a decision we had to make. Our commitment to mutual submission led us to do the hard work of give and take, and we sought to honor the Lord and to honor each other.

May the Lord teach each of us how to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Serve your husband, and serve your wife. Serve your parents, and serve your children. Serve your employers, and serve your employees. Serve your teacher, and serve your students. Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who is Lord over all. And if we do that, we might just become more like the church that Jesus longs for, to the glory of His holy name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another: Becoming the Church that Jesus Longs For*, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.