

## **Wise Relationships**

Eph 5:15—6:19

All too often, I've thought to myself, "Life would be so much easier if there were no other people in it!" I mean, I don't sin if I'm all alone. . . but as soon as you add another person into the mix, I'm confronted by all my worst impulses of envy, greed, selfishness, anger, and judgment.

In our time in Ephesians, we have been reminded that to be human is to be in community. And, as Troy taught us last week, to be in relationships means that we accept our human limitations—we cannot, as followers of Jesus, exploit others for the sake of our own desires. The way of the world is to treat others as little more than tools for our personal use, to make ourselves feel better, stronger, and more powerful than others. This sort of behaviour pushes others down to elevate ourselves. Paul says, "This is not the way of Jesus!" We've seen that the way of Jesus is life, not death. It is light, not darkness. And in this passage, it is wisdom, not foolishness. "Understand what the Lord wants you to do," says Paul. "Don't live like fools, but like those who are being wise."<sup>1</sup>

Today, we are talking about three very important relationship pairs: wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves and masters. In Paul's day, these were the building blocks of society, and there were assumptions about what these relationships should look like, just like there are today. Listen to this quote from Aristotle:

Of household management we have seen that there are three parts—one is the rule of master over slaves. . . , another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children. . . For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female. . . The inequality [between male and female] is permanent. . . The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. . . All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the power says of women, "Silence is a woman's glory but this is not equally the glory of man."<sup>2</sup>

When I led our Wednesday Bible study group through this passage last year, one person commented that if she'd heard this quote when she was younger, she'd have assumed it was from the Bible. Why? Because the gender hierarchies that we are so familiar with today, the ones that we often state are "right there in a plain reading of Scripture," are

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 5:15, 17, NLT

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became the Gospel Truth*, (Brazos Press, 2021), 48.

more influenced *by Aristotle's teachings* than by Paul. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians, Aristotle's teachings had become so deeply intertwined with every part of Greco-Roman culture that the "household codes," as they were known, were assumed to be simply the "normal" and "right" way of living. So, when Paul addresses these three relationships, he uses a framework that everyone in his day is highly familiar with. . . but then, in a revolutionary twist, he overturns all of their assumptions.

Beth Allison Barr says, "Aristotle is writing specifically to men about how they should rule and why they have the right to rule. He does not include inferiors in the conversations. Household governance is the domain of the Roman man—as master, father, and husband. The conversation is directed to men alone. By contrast, the Christian household codes address all the people in the house church—men, women, children, and slaves. *Everyone is included in the conversation.*"<sup>3</sup>

This passage in Ephesians has often been read as a command for all Christians through the ages: women must submit. Men must demonstrate unquestioned authority over women and children. Slaves must obey, no matter what their masters command. There are those who are in power and those who are powerless.

But compared to the household codes that existed in Paul's time, that's not at all what Paul was saying. Instead, he subtly *resists* the culture's narrative about what the relationships between genders, generations, and social classes should look like. In Paul's new and improved household code, he honours those who were usually kept silent. Shockingly, he speaks first to the "weaker" partner in each of the three relationships instead of to the stronger one.<sup>4</sup> The usual order of things is flipped in a reflection of God's upside-down kingdom, where he always chooses the weaker person for his will and purposes. Recall how God chose Jacob, a liar and schemer, over his brother Esau, or Gideon, from the smallest tribe of Israel, to deliver Israel, or David, the youngest and smallest of his brothers, to be his king over the nation, or chose to be born in a stable and raised in a town in the middle of nowhere instead of a palace.

God likes the underdogs and is passionate about reversing the "natural order of things" as we see it. Whether we like it or not, we often behave as if survival of the fittest is our basic guideline for life. We think that if we are more powerful, stronger, fitter, faster, wealthier, more attractive, and the life of the party, we will be accepted. We will be loved. We will be

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<sup>3</sup> Barr, 48-9.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, "Collaborative Preaching."

happy. But Jesus says, “The first will be last, and the last will be first,”<sup>5</sup> and Paul applies this teaching directly to three of the most common household relationships.

He speaks to the wives first, empowering them as persons in their own right in their marriage. The point is not to beat them down, saying, “You must submit to your husband!” No, he says, “Submit to *one another* out of reverence for Christ.”<sup>6</sup> It’s not a one-way relationship where the one in power gets to tell the other what to do, and the weaker party must fall in line. The command for the wife to submit to her husband was expected; Aristotle had said the same thing! Paul’s instructions to the husband, though, were revolutionary. The husband was to love as Christ loved, to give up his life for the one he loves, in short, to place himself *under* the personhood and will of his wife.

Think about this: Jesus, *the one who is God* not only submitted himself to a human form, but he also gave up his life so that his people could be holy and clean before God. *He placed himself under human authority* so that we could have life with God and freedom from our brokenness. The Creator submitted to his corrupt creation. Talk about a power reversal! This passage is *not* about the weaker vessel being told to submit again and again to a power that seeks to crush them. *It is about the one in power giving up all power for the sake of those who are powerless.*

Christian households were to be models of mutual respect and love. We don’t like the word “submission” much nowadays, and for good reason. Passages like this have been used to abuse far too many women. However, Paul upholds the value of women. He speaks to them first, identifying them in other passages as “co-heirs in Christ”<sup>7</sup> active in leading worship and service in the early church.<sup>8</sup> Instead of supporting the common view of men as the provider, protector, and ruler, he identifies men as servant-leaders who are to love sacrificially like Christ did. *The emphasis is on love and mutual submission demonstrated through service to one another, not authoritarian control.*

Paul redefines what good, wise relationships look like. The unity between genders is, Paul says, “a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.”<sup>9</sup> Just as the unification of Jews and Gentiles was a great mystery to the church, so is the unification of genders! It was unheard of, or at least very unpopular, for men and women to work equally together in Roman society. It was also almost unheard of for different races to work and worship together as the Jews and Gentiles were encouraged to do. Paul is

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<sup>5</sup> Matt 20:16

<sup>6</sup> Eph 5:21

<sup>7</sup> Gal 3:

<sup>8</sup> Rom 16

<sup>9</sup> Eph 5:32, NLT

shaping a new culture—one that makes space for *everyone* to be part of it equally—and while Paul speaks directly to marriage relationships, I would argue that this is true for all men and women regardless of whether you find yourself in a marriage or not.

Then Paul shifts to the second foundational relationship in his world: fathers and children. Just as for the wives earlier, the obedience of children was expected as part of the Roman household codes and was enforced by law and custom. A child's disobedience would bring dishonour on the entire family. As with the wives, Paul talks first to the children—the powerless half of this pair. He refers to the Old Testament—“honour your father and mother”—while also assuming the familiar Roman code. *However, he transforms the expectation of the father, instructing him to promote quiet instruction and correction rather than harsh punishment.* The Roman cultural norm was for the father to exert absolute, lifelong control over his children; Paul says that instead his authority should be exercised with love, avoiding harshness.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the Roman culture said that family honour was more important than anything, Paul says that honouring God through loving others is most important.

New Testament scholar Craig Keener says, “*Paul places value on children and the relationship between child and parent.* In the Roman world, newborn children were not considered a legal person until the father officially recognized them. Children could be abandoned or killed without repercussion.<sup>11</sup> Paul transforms this social norm, instructing fathers to treat their children gently rather than provoking them, and reminding fathers that they are not at the top of the social hierarchy; instead, the Lord is the “head” to whom they are accountable.”<sup>12</sup>

For us today, this command can extend just as easily to mothers; it's only that fathers were responsible for discipline in Paul's day. You could include any adult authority figure who is responsible for a child's well-being: mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, or coaches. The point is that the adult is not to flaunt their authority, but to treat the child with respect and love, always. Parent-child relationships are complicated; a wise relationship, Paul says, is built on mutual submission and love. Today, we recognize the impact that fathers have had for many of us. We honour those fathers who have loved and served us well, and we grieve with those who have had poor relationships with their fathers, or with their children, or have grieved their fathers.

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<sup>10</sup> Eph 6:4

<sup>11</sup> Keener, 553.

<sup>12</sup> Katelyn Entz, “Ephesians Teaching Notes,” 55-56.

The last of the three relationship pairs is slaves and masters. We don't have obvious slaves in our culture, but they're there: for example, sweatshops and human trafficking provide cheap human labour for almost all of our modern-day amenities and technologies. As with wives and children, Aristotle considered slaves "living tools" who were naturally inferior to masters and existed solely to serve those "better" than them. Just as with the wives and children, Paul subverts the systems that are already in place. Again, he first addresses the powerless ones—the slaves—directly, honouring them as persons beyond their station. Slaves were usually expected to adopt the gods of their family, which would have created conflict for Christians, but Paul instructs the slaves to pursue *peace* in their households and not to use their status as Jesus-worshippers to create trouble in their households.<sup>13</sup> Their obedience to their masters was to be reflective of their obedience and service to *Christ*—it demonstrates respect, reverence, and sincerity to *Christ* firstly, and to their masters as a result.

But listen! This is *not* an approval of the institution of slavery. Rather, Paul instructs the slaves how to live as faithful Jesus followers *within* the social structures in which they found themselves. Much to my irritation, Paul doesn't try to revolutionize the patriarchy on a grand scale. He doesn't condemn or abolish slavery, and sadly, these passages have been used to *support* the slave trade for hundreds of years. Our land acknowledgement this morning recognizes how the Canadian government has mistreated Indigenous peoples for centuries, often with these very Scriptures used to support racial contempt.

But that's a gross misinterpretation of what Paul is doing. Instead, *Paul encourages the church to subversively resist the assumptions of their culture*: if patriarchy was the rule, then Christian men should treat their wives with respect and dignity; if harsh discipline was the rule, then Christian parents should take care in their relationships with their children instead of abusing their power; if slavery was the rule, then Christian masters should treat their slaves fairly because they know that they are equal in the eyes of God. I'm grateful to Hannah Hunt for this quote: "Paul is not presenting a new ideal here, but giving instructions on how to operate within a system that already existed."<sup>14</sup> All too often, we can't change the social structures in which we find ourselves, but we *can* choose to *honour the dignity of the powerless and be mindful of how we use our own power*.

The assumptions of our world today are different than the ancient Roman world. In a strange reversal of Paul's day, our secular society is more concerned about gender equality, generational reconciliation, and social justice than the evangelical church. But in its concerns to flip the narrative, it often overcorrects. Take for example the 2023 movie

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<sup>13</sup> Snodgrass, 320.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts, 4.

*Barbie*, which tried to empower women but ended up portraying men as patriarchal buffoons incapable of having healthy relationships with women. Meanwhile, just last week, the Southern Baptist Convention voted 75% in favour of banning women as pastors and preachers and removing any churches from their denominations that support women in ministry.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, eliminating one half of the population from the opportunity to use their teaching and pastoral gifts in the church is identified by Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as “an opportunity for Southern Baptists to speak in truth, in unity.”<sup>16</sup>

The pendulum swings—in culture and therefore, in our homes and churches. “Unity” and “submission” are more often used by both the “big C church” and the secular world as catchphrases to support what *I want to do* over and against how it might affect others. Again, ironically, “unity” and “submission” are used in favour of those who are in power to squash the powerless—which is *exactly* what Paul was warning against.

The church today has an opportunity to flip the narrative. We have an opportunity to demonstrate wise relationships and in doing so, we paint a picture of unity in Christ. Again, to quote Hannah, “Paul has been adamant to emphasize *unity* that transcends previous categories of difference and hierarchy—namely, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>17</sup> If Jesus broke down the barrier between Jew and Gentile to allow *them* to be united as one community, one temple, and one body, then Jesus also broke down the social barriers between genders, generations, and classes.

What is unity? It is coming together in all our diversity to worship Jesus and live and work together, learning from one another. What is submission? It is the boundary that is put on our relationships that helps keep our grasping for power in check; it loves others, respects others, considers others before taking action; it stops and places my desires alongside the desires of others, never assuming that the way I want things done is the only or best way.

If you find yourself in a position of power—at work, at home, or in your family—how are you using your power? Is it for yourself? Does it squash others? Or does it love others with respect and honour as Christ loves us?

If you find yourself in a position of powerlessness, how are you behaving toward those in power? Christ *chose* powerlessness; we often have no choice. However, Paul says that “his strength is made perfect in my weakness.” Our willingness to love and honour those

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2026/06/10/us/southern-baptists-women-pastors-vote>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2026/06/10/us/southern-baptists-women-pastors-vote>

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Roberts, “Collaborative Preaching.”

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who have power over us shows the love of Christ to them. Christian women, despite having very little power in their world, had the opportunity to show the love of Christ to their husbands and in doing so, demonstrated the transformative power of Christ in their lives. Christian children had the opportunity to honour their parents instead of rebelling against them, showing them Christ's love. Christian slaves had the opportunity to show the love of Christ to their masters in the hope that God would transform their lives, too.

Hear me again: This does *not* mean that unequal power dynamics are okay. But they exist. And within the ones that we find ourselves, how will we behave? Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church—and mine for you today—is that you might “be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.”<sup>18</sup> And slowly, we might just change the world.

Let's pray.

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<sup>18</sup> Eph 5:15–17, NLT