

SUBMISSION AS PRESENTED IN EPHESIANS 5:20-33

In order to understand what Paul is saying about submission, the context is crucial. In v 4:17, Paul begins an exhortation for the Ephesians to put off the old self and put on the new and live as children of light. Here is a brief outline of Ephesians 4:17-6:20 that includes the section on wives, husbands, children and slaves.

- I. Be imitators of God and live as children of light (4:17-6:20)
 - A. Do not live as the gentiles who have lost all sensitivity. (4:17-19)
 - B. Put off the old and put on the new (4:20-25)
 - C. Tell the truth, do not “sin in your anger,” and do not steal (4:25-28)
 - D. Do not allow unwholesome talk and be compassionate. (4:29-32)
 - E. Be imitators of God with no sexual immorality, obscenity, etc. (5:1-7)
 - F. Once you were darkness, now you are light (5:8-14)
 - G. Be wise and filled with the spirit (5:15-6:20)
 1. Do not get drunk but give thanks (5:15-20)
 2. Submit to one-another (5:21-6:9)
 - a. Wives to husbands
 - b. Husbands to wives
 - c. Children to parents
 - d. Slaves and masters to the Lord

When examining the Greek text, one notes that verses 5:18-20 (possibly 5:18-22) are actually one long sentence. The main verb for this section is expressed in verse 18, “Do not get drunk but **be filled with the Spirit.**” All of the other verbs in 18-19 are participles. This means they are examples of how one is filled with the spirit: “(18) be filled with the Spirit . . . (19) speaking . . . singing . . . making melody . . . (20) being thankful . . . (21) being submissive to one another”. The problem in translation is how to view the participle, “submitting” in verse 21. Modern translations often view the final participle as though it was functioning as a finite verb and serving as an imperative: “Submit to one another!” However, this is an extremely rare usage of participles. As Wallace notes (Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* p. 651) “. . . many, including recent editions of the Greek NT, would consider the last participle as imperatival. Such is doubtful . . .” After presenting reasons for this, he notes, “Although there is an obvious connection between vv 21 and 22, v 21 can just as easily function as a hinge between the two sections. The thought of vv 15-21 flows right into 5:22-6:9. This section on the (extended) family, whether it starts at v 21 or v 22, is the only major section in the body of Ephesians to begin *without* a conjunction. It is as if the instruction in the former section is meant to be “ringing in the ears” of the hearers as they turn to the issue of the family. Consequently, any dramatic break between the two is overdrawn. . . . To view any of these participles as imperatival is to view the passage from the English point of view only, ignoring the Greek.

From the above, Ephesians 5:21-24 must be seen in the context of believers who are mutually submitting to one another. *Both* the husband and wife are voluntarily placing the good of the other first (Eph. 5:21). The connection between verses 21 and 22 is especially clear when it is noted that in Greek there is no verb in v 22. Instead, the verb is understood from v. 21. It is also important to keep in mind that this mutual submission is based on the example of Christ. Wives are to fear (which has the connotation of revering or respecting) the husband while husbands are to love and sacrifice themselves for their wives as Christ loves and sacrificed himself for the Church. Wives are submitting to a “headship” love that does not have as it’s goal the selfish meeting of one’s personal needs, but the maturity, and holiness of the wife. This, then, is not a submission of a servile nature, but a mutual submission of equals in love.

Another point to note when reading this section is that Paul seems to be selecting the aspect of submission that is most difficult for each group. One of the most difficult things for wives to do is to submit to their husbands. One of the most difficult things for husbands to do is to love their wives. Likewise, children find obeying their parents difficult, and slaves found it difficult to submit to their masters, especially when the masters were unkind.

Ephesians 5:18-33

18 καὶ μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἴνω, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία, ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι,
and do not become drunk with wine, in which is debauchery, but **be filled with the spirit**

19 λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ᾄδοντες
speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and songs² spiritual¹, *singing*

καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ, 20 εὐχαριστοῦντες πάντοτε ὑπὲρ πάντων
and *psalming (making music)* in the heart² your¹ to the Lord, *giving thanks* always for everything

ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί. 21 Ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις
in the name of the Lord² our¹ Jesus Christ to God also Father. *submitting* to one another

ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ, 22 Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ,
in fear/reverence/respect of Christ, wives to your own husband as to the Lord,

23 ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἐστὶν κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικὸς ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας,
for the husband **is** the head of the woman (wife) as also Christ [is] head of the church

αὐτὸς σωτὴρ τοῦ σώματος· 24 ἀλλὰ ὡς ἡ ἐκκλησία ὑποτάσσεται τῷ Χριστῷ, οὕτως καὶ
he himself savior of the body but as the church submits to Christ thus also

αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ἐν παντί. 25 Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς
the wives to the husbands in all things. Husbands, love the wives. Just as

καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς,
also Christ loved the church and himself² he gave¹ on behalf of/for it.

26 ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι,
in order that it² he might purify/make holy¹ cleansing by the washing of water by/through the word

27 ἵνα παραστήσῃ αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ ἔνδοξον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, μὴ ἔχουσαν σπίλον ἢ
in order that might present² he¹ to himself⁴ glorious⁵ the church³ not having spot or

ρυτίδα ἢ τι τῶν τοιούτων, ἀλλ' ἵνα ἡ ἀγία καὶ ἄμωμος. 28 οὕτως
wrinkle or any such things but that it might be holy and unblemished Thus, so

ὀφείλουσιν [καὶ] οἱ ἄνδρες ἀγαπᾶν τὰς ἑαυτῶν γυναῖκας ὡς τὰ ἑαυτῶν σώματα.
should/ought also the husbands love their own wives as their own bodies

ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἑαυτὸν ἀγαπᾷ. 29 οὐδεὶς γὰρ ποτε τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σάρκα
the one who loves their own wife himself (he) loves no one² for¹ ever his own flesh

ἐμίσησεν ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφει καὶ θάλπει αὐτήν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς
hated but he nourishes/cares and cherishes it. Just as also Christ [nourishes and cares for]

τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, 30 ὅτι μέλη ἐσμὲν τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ.
the church because members we are of body² His¹

31 ἀντὶ τούτου καταλείψει ἄνθρωπος [τὸν] πατέρα καὶ [τὴν] μητέρα καὶ προσκολληθήσεται
for this reason shall leave² a man¹ the father and mother and shall cleave/be united

πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν. 32 τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο
to the wife² his¹ and they shall be the two into flesh one. a mystery⁴ this¹

μέγα ἐστίν· ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ
a great³ is² I² but¹ am talking/speaking concerning/with regards to Christ and

εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν. 33 πλὴν καὶ ὑμεῖς οἱ καθ' ἓνα, ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ
concerning the church. Nevertheless/however also you to each one one of his own

γυναῖκα οὕτως ἀγαπάτω ὡς ἑαυτόν, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἵνα φοβῆται τὸν ἄνδρα.
wife thus love as yourself. and the wife that should fear/revere/respect the husband

Ephesians 5:18-33

Note the difference in how this section is handled in each of the following translations.

New International Version

18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 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. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — 30 for we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a profound mystery -- but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

New American Standard Version

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; 21 and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; 26 that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. 28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body. 31 For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.