

Family in Jesus

Ephesians 5:21-6:4

When we grow up, Heather and I want to be like Stephen & Ingrid. They've ordered their relationships with each other as husband and wife, and with their four children, all around serving and reflecting Jesus. They're people we meet with regularly to be disciplined in how to do marriage and parenting and family life well as followers of Jesus.

There's lots we've learned and keep learning from our own parents, and from lots of you in this church, too. But sticking with embarrassing Stephen & Ingrid, we see in them a living example of the instructions we're given in Ephesians 5:21-6:4.

We see a married couple who put the joy and welfare of the other above their own, and a desire to give every opportunity to support the other's spiritual life growth and flourishing. We see parents who have raised four children without exasperating them, but with tenderness and healthiness and discipleship in following Jesus. And we see people who exemplify living a life of sacrificial love, as Ephesians 5:2 describes.

In Ephesians 5:21-6:9, we read what's sometimes called the 'house codes' for the Christian community. It's practical teaching about family and work that consistently gets presented to the early church. Paul writes it here, he writes the same stuff in Colossians 3 to a different set of churches, and Peter also teaches the same way in 1 Peter 2-3.

When you first read it with 21st century Western glasses on, you squirm. It reads like an old fashioned, politically incorrect embarrassment that you'd rather skip over, hoping that nobody's coming to church for the first time today because this pretty much invites writing off Christian faith as having nothing to do with the modern world.

But to read it and write it off like that would be a tragic missed opportunity. In this teaching is something radically counter cultural - both in the time it was written, and today - something beautiful and dignifying of one another as human beings created by God and under His care that nothing else gets close to. It's something called mutual submission.

v.21 begins with that command to all those who are Christians - 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.' That we treat as incredibly precious the people given as gifts to us, and spell out love for them with sacrifice.

Everything that we're going to read after this, addressed to wives, husbands, children, parents, (and employees and employers, which we'll look at next week) - is grounded in this calling - that we both imitate and worship Jesus by giving ourselves up for one another.

Paul's writing in a culture that thought that this new movement called Christianity was going to destroy society. Men and women being *equal* in church, worshipping and eating *together*? Children having *rights* and being treated as intelligent people instead of property? Slaves and their masters calling each other brothers and being the same status before God? This stuff could tear 1st century Greco-Roman society apart!

Other 'house codes' of the time would only have addressed the husbands, the fathers, and the masters as the ones with rights. But Paul's radical teaching addresses wives, children and slaves too - those with no rights in that society - as truly, fully children of God and members of the body of Christ too. And he teaches that the privileged ones of the day - husbands, fathers, masters - must actually give themselves up sacrificially for their wives, children and slaves!

What Paul's writing is a counter cultural bombshell. But it also teaches the churches of that day and our day that following Jesus doesn't bring chaos, but actually a beautiful order in our relationships.

And it's not by insisting on equality, which is one of the gods of our culture. Equality is about claiming the same rights as the person next to you. Instead, it's by insisting on mutual submission, which is far more adventurous, Christ-like and completely unworldly.

Mutual submission is about giving up your rights for the sake of the person next to you, and trusting that they will do the same for you. You can have equality without love. But mutual submission *is* love, and brings dignity and equality far more powerfully than charters and legislation.

As we go through the instructions to husbands, wives, children and parents, it will help to keep this in mind - everybody here is being called to love like Jesus, who '...did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...' (Phil. 2:6-7)

Who's been a great example of a husband/wife or parent in your life? What makes them stand out for you?

In v.22-24, Christian wives are given some brief instructions. They may be free and equal with the men in the church (however scandalous that was to their 1st century society), but they're called to submit to their husbands as an act of worship to Jesus (however scandalous that is to our 21st century society).

The husband is described as the 'head' in the marriage (*kephale* in the Greek) just as Christ is described as 'head' (*kephale*) of the Church. It means that there is an authority that belongs to the husband, which is like a responsibility he has to exercise. Just as the Church is the family of people who have trusted Jesus and wholeheartedly declared, 'our lives and destinies are in your hands,' the Christian wife has wholeheartedly and adventurously declared to her husband, 'my life and destiny is in your hands.'

This has got nothing to do with women being in positions of leadership in society or in the church, both of which Scripture is really positive about - it's about the marriage relationship.

Sometimes people suggest 'head' means 'source', like the head of a river. But *kephale* is also used of Jesus in chapter 1, where Paul's clearly thinking about Jesus having *authority* over all things in creation. Husbands don't have *that* (although too many of us swan about like we do) - and they can't do with their authority in a marriage just whatever they want.

Instead, they've only got this authority in a marriage *like Jesus has with the Church*. That means, it's only there when it's exercised the way Jesus exercised it. And in vv.25-31, the husband gets far more instruction about how they are to live this out. 'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her...'

The word for 'love' there is *agape* - the deepest, most sacrificial, making-yourself-smaller-for-the-good-of-the-other love. The love that Jesus showed His disciples in handing things over to them to lead, in washing their feet, and in going to a cross to die so they didn't have to. Only *that* kind of sacrificial love-like-Jesus is fitting for a Christian husband to be someone that a wife can put her lives in the hands of.

What God is looking for is this - husbands who will give things up for the welfare, joy and especially the spiritual growth of their wives (like vv.26-27 picture). Giving up time, money, comfort, diary space, energy, prayer and

more besides, for their wives to be blessed. For her to be flourishing physically, socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

God's looking for husbands who will do the housework - *more* than their fair share. Husbands who will forego their recreation time to let their wives have some. Husbands who will let their wives pursue the things God's calling them to grow in. Husbands who speak well of their wives, and are unswervingly loyal to them in public and private. Husbands who will treat as incredibly precious the gift that has been given to them, and will look after her with all the care and tenderness that Christ gives to the Church.

This is all miles away from the misreadings and terrible abuse that men have put this to, including shamefully in the Church. I heard from a fellow minister last year that Caithness & Sutherland Women's Aid report a *rise* in faith based abuse - where church men are treating their wives abusively and telling them that it's her role to submit. Christians need to stand up in public and live out in private that this lie must be condemned.

No form of abuse - from physical to sexual to emotional to controlling or coercive behaviour - can ever claim support from the Word of God. Rather, the Word of God condemns that behaviour, and commends in this passage just the opposite way of living - treating your wife's welfare and joy and life in Jesus as your greatest priority, and worthy of your sacrifices.

A Christian marriage looks beautiful when it looks like this - she trusts him so much that she's willing to put their lives and destinies in his hands - they talk everything through, pray it through together, he listens to her wisdom and only makes decisions well in hearing it - but she trusts him to make the call and take the responsibility. And it works because every call he makes benefits her more than him, in every way.

Now you might still think this sounds chauvinistic and old fashioned in an equal rights day and age. But I'd ask you to take a look around this offended world. I see husbands and partners flying the flag for equality on social media, but 'I've got football on' or 'I'm going golfing' or 'I'm out with the guys' trumps everything. He does what he wants, she looks after the kids and the house, and if she can fit in some time for her recreation or rest, fine - but he'd never think to offer her a break.

What ways do you need to step up as a husband? What ways do you need to step up as a wife? What ways can you support your married friends?

In vv.29-32, we read that the whole marriage relationship is all just reflecting a deeper union that all of us can enjoy - whether married, single, divorced, widowed, whoever we are - the union of Jesus with His Church. We read that just as a man and woman are joined as one flesh in marriage; that's how united we are with Jesus when we become part of His family, the Church.

Paul's used a few images in Ephesians now to describe who we are in Jesus. A building, built together as one with Jesus as the cornerstone. A body, growing together and each playing our different roles with Jesus as the head. A bride, loved and lived for and died for and presented as precious and beautiful to the Jesus who did all that. In all of these images, there's an amazing union with Jesus that we realise we have when we've got life in Jesus.

It's the kind of unity with Him that Jesus Himself prayed for us in John 17 - 'Father, you and me are One, may they also be *in us* - I in them and you in me.' Even if all of the language and images are mysterious and hard to get our heads around, here's the mind-blowing thing that Paul describes as the mystery, the 'revealed secret' in Ephesians 5:32 - that Jesus wants us, His followers, to be one with Him.

Our identities are still our own, just like the husband and wife are still identified with their own names and distinctive. For one thing, Jesus is God, and we definitely are *not*. But our identities are also totally bound up with one another. Jesus has chosen to bind up His very identity with the Church that He loved, lived for, died for and rose again to rescue. He has sacrificially loved us and gifted us all that.

We in turn are called to submit - to put our *whole* lives and destinies in His hands. Not to make Jesus 'a part of our lives' that we pick up on Sundays and whenever else we might remember. Not to live our lives near Him or alongside Him. But to live our lives *in Him* - finding that our whole hearts, minds, attitudes, relationships, choices and lifestyles are completely defined by our being united to Him, like a branch in a vine.

Are we longing to bind our whole lives to Jesus as much as He is longing to bind His whole life to us?

In 6:1-4, we read about how children and their parents are supposed to treat one another. In Paul's culture, women may have had little in the way of rights, but children had even fewer. There was no UNICEF charter of

children's rights like our kids are all learning at their primary schools. But God dignifies children in His Word by addressing them.

'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.' God's looking for children who honour and respect their parents *in the Lord* - so far as obeying mum and dad agrees with doing what God wants. Like everyone else, the radical call to children is to love God and be loyal to Him above everyone else, including Mum and Dad.

When children grow up respecting the lead of their parents, it makes for a culture and society that functions well - that's the corporate sense of blessing that's described in vv.2-3. Now, next door, the children are hearing from Heather and the others about children honouring their parents. But they're also hearing about parents leading their children well - and that's what those in this room need to hear more about.

v.4 is brief, but it's got a lot in it. It addresses fathers, because they were the parents with the legal rights and responsibilities of the day. We can fairly say 'Mum and Dad' are being addressed in our culture.

It starts this way: 'Mum and Dad, do not exasperate your children...' Most parents can probably immediately think of a dozen ways that we exasperate our children! The word exasperate here describes 'making them angry.' Now, we all know there's toddler tantrums and teenage tempers, and that's part of how fallen human beings grow up.

But God calls parents to think through how we treat our children, and how we're responsible for exasperating them. And a lot of the exasperation comes from expectation.

Expectations about our children's behaviour - we exasperate them when we expect our children to 'be reasonable' and forget that they're only four! Or when we get angry at our kids for not getting out the door quick enough when really, it's us who are running late and we're just taking it out on the kids. Or when we put them in unfamiliar environments and expect them to get on with it. Or when we don't see the scared child behind the angry actions.

Expectations about our children's achievements - we exasperate them when we compare them with other children. When we let go of encouraging them to be the best they can be, and slide into pushing them to achieve the grades or the times or the number of after school activities of their friends. When we measure our worth as parents by our children's achievements, we set them

up on pedestals as our idols; we look around to see how high the other parents' idols are; and when our kids fall down, your heart sinks and they get chipped and cracked.

And there's an exasperation that comes from kids growing up into the same anxiety filled, individualistic rat race, materialistic way of life that their parents live in and raise them in. As kids grow up, they learn how to live from you. If your life prizes material things and getting ahead of others and finding happiness at the weekends, whilst masking loneliness and anxiety and the fear of how others see you, what do you think your kids will become?

But v.4 goes on: '...instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.' *Instead*. The alternative to exasperating your children, and raising them into a godless anxiety, is to disciple them. Raise them in a way of life that prizes loving Jesus, serving others, finding joy in every day and every circumstance, with community and peace and freedom from comparison.

There's no neutral way to bring up children. Lots of people have told me that they're happy for their kids to think about what they believe and maybe one day, if they want to come to church, that's fine with them. But kids imitate the lives they see their parents living. If you're living in Jesus, discipling them to do the same, v.4 tells us that's the *alternative* to exasperating your children. That's my goal as a dad. That's what I see in our friends Stephen and Ingrid, in how they've raised their kids.

As Christian parents, we're called to teach and to show our children how to know and love Jesus. Being here at church, part of this community, is part of it. Here, our children hear and see from other great Christian role models too. Being a bit in and out about participating in that isn't just a problem for you, it means your kids are missing out too.

But it's also not something you just delegate to the Sunday kids' group leaders and youth leaders. It's you as parents who are called to disciple your children, raising them in the training and instruction of the Lord, being a living example of how to follow Jesus and how that looks really different from the world around us.

Mutual submission in this relationship looks like children honouring and obeying their parents, because what they find in their parents are grace filled, servant hearted, safe, loving, sacrificial parents whom they can truly honour and respect. God's looking for parents who will treat as incredibly precious

the gift that God has given them, who will sacrifice themselves to help their kids know and love Jesus fully.

What's one way that you have seen our children (in this church or in your family) benefit from being trained in following Jesus?

A couple of closing thoughts. The relationships that we've looked at today are the ones behind the closed doors of your homes. The people we love the most see the best and the worst of us. They're the ones who see how different we can be in public and in private.

It's right there, in your homes, with the people who live there, that your character as a disciple of Jesus 'becoming who you are' in Him is most tested and most on display. If there's an urgent discipleship need in our churches, this is right there at the top - that we would be husbands, wives, parents and children who devote themselves to mutual submission to honour Jesus together.

What we've looked at in God's Word today describes an ideal for family life - what marriages and parenting *should* look and feel like. That doesn't mean it's a fantasy that's beyond us - we're really called to live more and more like what we've been made to be; to 'become what we are.'

But there won't be a single one of us who hasn't had something tug at us today. A memory of how things really *weren't* like this. Or how they really *aren't* like this. Scars from experiences of marriage, parenting or childhood that bear little resemblance to the beauty of mutual submission. Experiences of singleness, childlessness, loneliness, marriages and families with a mix of faith in Jesus and none. And all of us will know the ways that we have fallen short as husbands, wives, parents and children.

Two things are on offer for you right now, today. There is the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, completely freely available to anyone who wants it. It's in believing that His death on the cross achieves forgiveness for every sin, every shortcoming, those you've been guilty of and those others have been guilty of making you suffer - that grace and freedom sets you free. You only need to ask Jesus for that; sit still, and let Him wash over you with that beautiful grace.

And the other thing on offer is our pastoral care team. Many of us will be sat here at the front, available to pray with you at the end. They're ready, willing and expectant about being available for people particularly today - so please,

don't go home burdened, but let them help you. They'll listen confidentially, and pray lovingly.

I pray that we'll learn from God's Word, and from people like Stephen and Ingrid living it out, how to be families in Jesus. And I pray that, as we put first this idea - to sacrifice myself and my rights for you, trusting that you'll do the same for me - our marriages, families, church family and city will flourish in the new and infinitely fuller life that Jesus brings. Amen.