

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This morning we continue our journey in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. Over the last two Sundays we have seen how God has restored our spiritual life. He's put us in churches where the gifts he's provided for growing those churches will build us into a unified body as we become mature in our faith. Those gifts will provide us with stability, he says in Ephesians 4, so that we can grow up into Christ and build up one another in love as we each do our part. Today we discover how we can do our part in the context of our households.

Before we look in detail at the passage let's just confirm what we understand about the Christian worldview that we work from. Paul has made great efforts to remind his readers of the unity they enjoy as God's people. Despite the differences in their background, despite not coming from a Jewish heritage, they've been given an equal status with the Jews.

Paul begins this section with a simple instruction that underpins everything that follows: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." There's no hint here of inferiority. Submission is something we don't like in our modern, liberated world. But submission here means giving up the rights we have in order to serve others. This is an instruction for wives, for husbands, for parents and for children; it's a very counter-cultural instruction in our culture where rights are so important.

But notice this isn't an arbitrary rule. No, it's an instruction to give up our rights for the greater good of God's kingdom.

Paul begins by talking to wives, he says in verse 22 "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour." Our natural inclination isn't to submit to one another but to rule one another. Wives can find this hard because they don't want to submit to the rule of another. Husbands find it hard because it gives them a perfect excuse to exercise their urge to dominate. But neither response is a Christian one.

Paul has been telling us how God has renewed us in his image through Jesus' death and resurrection, and part of that renewal is the ending of the contest between men and women. God wants women and men to work together in harmony the way he intended, to build one another up. This will mean women accepting the role of their husbands as the head of the family. This doesn't mean

that they need to be doormats or lose their individuality; nor does it limit their use of their God-given gifts. In fact, as we'll see in a moment, if the husband does his part correctly wives should be empowered to use all the gifts they have so their partnership, their family, grows from strength to strength.

Which brings us to husbands. We must notice something important here. Husbands are not instructed to be the leaders of the family. They're not told to be the decision maker or the bread winner or the disciplinarian; they're told, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." You're to love your wife by doing what Jesus did: by giving up your life for her. Paul's talking about giving up your rights for the sake of your wife. He's talking about doing all you can to nurture and care for her.

Let's think for a moment about what it means for the husband to be the head of the wife the way Christ is the head of the church.

The role of the head is to help the various parts of the body work together to promote bodily growth. It sets the parts in the correct alignment. So the husband's role in the family is to free up its members to do the best they can to bring unity and harmony to the whole.

Which brings us to parents and children.

If children are to grow to maturity and contribute to the harmony and well-being of the family they must learn to obey their parents. They're to 'obey their parents in the Lord.'

Paul gives two reasons why children need to obey their parents.

The first is simply that this is right. Children don't yet understand all there is to know about the world we live in and so they need to follow the instruction of their parents.

Second, he points out that this is God's commandment. Obedience to parents will result in blessing for children just as obedience to God will result in blessing to adults.

But having said that, notice the instruction to fathers to make sure they don't go beyond the authority that God has given them. "do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." We must be careful how we discipline our children, how we speak to them about what we're telling them to do. We need to care for them the way God cares for us.

The model for our parenting is our heavenly father isn't it? We need to treat our children the way our heavenly father treats us; parents are called to treat their children with the sort of love and patience and forgiveness that God shows us over and over again.

So how we can do our part, in the context of our household in building one another up in love? Well, if we're truly united with Christ then our basic approach to our relationships will be one of mutual submission, working together to do Christ's work. For wives that means working together with a partner, not toiling for a master, nor acting as an adversary. For husbands it means not dominating his wife but sacrificing himself in order to serve the one who is joined to him in a unity that reflects the unity between Christ and the Church. For children it means obeying parents because God has placed them in families. For parents it means providing a loving environment where children will grow to independence loving and serving Christ. In Jesus' name. Amen.