

LIVING THE NEW LIFE (4)

FAMILY LIFE AS A WITNESS

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Last week I began by asking what a Christian life looks like. This next section of Paul's letter to Ephesus and the surrounding churches continues that theme by looking at Christian households. Remember, the main thrust of this letter is the reconciliation won for us in Christ and the unity that flows out of our shared life. If this unity cannot be experienced and seen in Christian households, then where can it? (See 1 Timothy 3:5) Greek and Roman households were extended families, nominally headed up by the oldest man but often controlled by a matriarch, and included husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves. Paul addresses each of these groups. His approach is consistent and simple – these relationships are to be shaped by their shared commitment to the Lord and their desire to build one another up in Christ.

This passage, sometimes referred to as the 'Household Code', is a continuation of the previous section, which began back in 4:1. "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I [Paul] urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." It is also linked very closely to the preceding verses, starting with, "Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." (5:2) and linked by, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (21) This last verse is important in our understanding and application of the following verses. Paul both concludes the previous section and begins this one with a call for all to 'submit to one another' – the basis of Christian unity. He then gives three examples of what this 'submission' looks like: wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and owners. There are other examples he could have included, (eg. mothers, siblings) but these will suffice. He uses a common pattern in all three cases.

First, Christian freedom is not the right to live scandalous lives. Because of this he charges wives, children and slaves not to take advantage of their freedom in Christ and so bring dishonour on both the church and God. Next, to balance this need to maintain a credible witness, he tells husbands, fathers and slave owners not to take advantage of their social position and show by the way they live that there is another way to live. To each of these examples Paul adds a theological point. The way we live has implications for what we believe, and *vice versa*. Indeed, Paul's theological comment on Christian marriage (31-33) seems to me to say that any attempt to redefine marriage is more than a simple alteration to the legal code or dictionary – it has deep, theological implication that no human government has the right to change.

It is this link between what we believe and the way we behave that is the key to interpreting this, and most, passages. I referred to this last week as I encouraged you to find the line between relativism on the one hand and absolutism on the other. As we take these three examples, together with the opening injunction that we are all, husbands and wives, fathers and children, owners and slaves, to submit to one another, a series of questions arise. Firstly, and most obvious, is the example of slaves. This passage cannot be reinterpreted simply by substituting employers and employees for owners and slaves. Paul is addressing Christian households, not the work place. (That does not mean that these words have no bearing on the world of employment, but we'll return to that in a moment.) We consider slavery to be one of the greatest injustices of our world today and would not countenance the idea that a Christian should own another human being. Paul's words are address to a different culture altogether and are no longer applicable as they stand. But if that is true of slavery, might it not also be true of marriage and family life? That is certainly how many would approach this passage. How are we to answer our critics on this matter?

Paul has already pointed us in the direction of an answer to this. For him these three example illustrate a theological point: the nature of

God's relationship with the church, the abiding promises of God and the certainty of final judgement. These truths stand eternal, but the examples, as seen in the case of slavery, do not. Our task as modern-day interpreters of God's eternal truth is to discover the theology behind the examples and stories of Scripture (not always as easy a task as here) and ask ourselves what will the practice of that theology look like in our present context? This is a much wider task than simply using these verses to expound a particular view of marriage. To do so is to use Scripture back to front. The important thing is that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (25). The question I must ask is how can I show that truth in the way I live? Well, one way (one of many) is to love my wife as Christ has loved me. In a similar fashion, Paul's comments about fathers and children show that God wants the world to see that he keeps his promises 'from generation to generation'. Fatherhood is more than an exercise in parental authority, it is handing on our faith to our children. Slaves and owners, too, show by the way they live that there is one true master of us all, to whom we must all give account. That basic truth has implications for many areas of our life today, including, but by no means limited to, industrial relations.

Following this approach I hope you can see that these three limited examples can take us beyond the issues addressed in the text. By seeking out the underlying truth we can then ask how this might be applied today to situations and issues not directly addressed by Scripture. In today's world we have to face moral and ethical questions Paul never dreamed of. Bioengineering, environmentalism, animal welfare, artificial intelligence, autonomous technology, consumerism, euthanasia; these, and many more, are all hot topics that we need to think Biblically about, and which we can only do by getting deeper into God's word than simply drawing up a list of Biblical rules and regulations.

I am not suggesting that all the issues I just mentioned are addressed in this short passage. They are not, but let me give you a short list of some practical applications that I think can legitimately be

draw from Ephesians 5:21-6:9. These are mainly concerned with family life, but have wider implications. They include:

- creating a context of grace, love, support, respect, and encouragement
- always speaking the truth in love
- attending to the material and emotional needs of one another
- teaching, enlightening, warning, holding accountable, and disciplining, all as part of life lived to Christ
- refusing to put down, demean, or damage one another (shrill and angry speech does not belong)
- rejecting jealousy and contempt
- granting freedom within legitimate boundaries
- avoiding unhealthy pressure or expectations

All of this takes time and effort, but if we are to walk in the fullness of this new life in Christ we need to pursue this wisdom from God. In response to how we do this, I refer you back to my series at the beginning of the year, 'How I read the Bible'.

Amen.

Kevin Dare

Beeston Baptist Church

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