

Principles for Relationship

On Black Friday in November 2008, hundreds of out-of-control bargain hunters busted through the front doors of a Long Island Wal-Mart. The frenzied mob barreled through a line of employees in the entry knocking some to the ground and sending others fleeing for their lives. In the stampede, one young male employee was trampled to death.

Although extreme, this is an example of our selfish sin nature in action. With no concern for others, each person selfishly acts to fulfill their own desires, charging ahead no matter who might get hurt in the process. Every man – and woman – for himself.

But this is not God's way. He is not a God of chaos and selfishness, but of order and love. He has established a hierarchy for His people and our relationships. Ephesians shows us God's ordered design for marriage, family, work, and the church. When we willingly follow His design we will discover the joy, peace, and fulfillment in community that God intends.

Rules of Engagement

Read Ephesians 5:21-33 and 6:1-9. Make a list of all the categories of relationships Paul discusses.

Write out 5:21 below. Circle the verb Paul uses as a command. Underline the reason we should obey that command.

The word "submit" has been misused, misunderstood, and abused. Let's start by digging into the dictionary definition for the Greek word *hypotasso*, which is translated as "submit" in English.

According to *Strong's Greek and Hebrew Dictionary*, the verb "submit," - found in 5:21, 22, and 24 - is a Greek military term meaning "to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader". In general use, it means to put things in an orderly fashion under something else. It communicates the idea of *voluntarily* yielding to an established hierarchy.

Disorder produces only chaos. Therefore, God has established an order for all our relationships. His proper order brings about our good and results in His glory and honor.

In 5:21, Paul begins his discussion of God's order with a blanket statement of mutual submission. All Christians are to voluntarily "submit" themselves to other Christians (5:21). This attitude of reciprocal yielding requires humility and selflessness. The basis of this position is our love for Christ and our desire to please and serve Him. The outcome is the edification of the church.

Read Philippians 2:1-5. How does this passage help us understand what it means to “submit to one another?” Who do we imitate when we do this?

Husbands and Wives

One specific relationship in which submission is needed for order to reign is marriage. Imagine the chaos – perhaps you’ve even seen it – when both husband and wife strive for their own will and way without consideration for the other person. Paul’s prescription for marriage, although radical to first-century ears, takes Christians back to God’s original design.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day, wives had obligations to their husbands, but nothing was expected from the men. God’s standards for the marriage relationship were revolutionary. Yes, women should respect and follow their husbands’ leadership. But the husbands must love and care for their wives like they do themselves.

This kind of *mutual* relationship had its roots in Genesis. A husband and wife are one flesh, a union forged by God (Genesis 2:20-25). A relationship created with a specific chain of authority to produce order and glorify God.

Reread Ephesians 5:22-24. List the God-ordained lines of authority you find.

I readily admit that my sin nature rears its ugly head when I read “the husband is the head of the wife.” But of course I nod my head approvingly just two sentences later: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her...” Oh yeah, I want my husband to fulfill His God-given role without me fulfilling mine. But without both of us following God’s design there will be chaos and need within the marriage.

The Greek word translated as “love” in this passage is *agape*, which we explored two lessons ago. It’s the same kind of intentional, selfless love God has for us. Husbands are to deliberately choose to act in love towards their wives with their welfare in mind.

Before we move on to the other relationships Paul explores, I want to share a quote with you from *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*. Commentator Klyne Snodgrass explains this difficult passage of Scripture far better than I ever could:

Ephesians 5:23 does not focus on authority, but on the self-giving love of both Christ and the husband. “Head” in this context suggests “responsibility for”. The husband has a leadership role, though not in order to boss his wife or use his position as privilege. Just as Jesus redefined greatness as being a servant (Matthew 20:26-27), Paul redefines being head as having a responsibility to love, to give oneself, and to nurture. A priority is placed on the husband, but contrary to ancient society, it is for the benefit of the wife. The activity of both wife and husband is based in their relationship to Christ and in his giving himself for the church.

Although the roles of husband and wife are unique and different, this passage assumes the unity and equality of the marriage partners. Husbands are to love their wives *as their own bodies*. And *the two will become one flesh*.

Paul boils our marriage roles down to their essence in 5:33. What is the primary task for the wife? For the husband?

Note: For a wonderful exposition on these roles, check out “Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs” by Emerson Eggerichs.

Children and Parents

We’ve all seen unruly, disobedient children whose parents allow them to run all over them and others too. This situation not only hurts the children in the long run, it also dishonors God. God has established a pattern for parents and children that benefits the children, the family as a whole, and brings glory to God. Like marriage, this is a relationship with mutual responsibility.

Read Ephesians 6:1-4. What are God’s expectations for children?

What are God’s expectations for fathers (parents)?

“Obey” in 6:1 means to do as you are told. God makes it clear: children are to do what their parents tell them to do. And God promised to bless their obedience.

However, God has also established some boundaries for parents. The stronger parent has an obligation to the weaker child. We are not to be demanding, harsh, or unreasonable.

Read Colossians 3:20-21. What reason does Paul give here for parents to not act in a way that creates bitterness in their children?

A parent’s concern should be the welfare of the child. We discipline, train, and teach them for their good, not for some kind of self-satisfaction.

According to verse 4, what is the parenting goal?

What are some ways you can – or have – help your child to love God more and know Him better?

Masters and Slaves

Read Ephesians 6:5-9.

Once again, Paul writes to apply God's expectations to a primary relationship. It's estimated that there were more than 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire during Paul's time. That would have been 1/3 of the entire population! And the majority of these were employed in the home. Although slavery is no longer a part of our culture, the principles in this passage apply to any authority/subordinate relationship like employer and employee.

Based on the passage you just read, mark the following statements as true or false:

___ ***We should obey our employer just like we should obey Christ.***

___ ***We only have to obey them when they are watching us – just enough to look good.***

___ ***My service and obedience is based on my devotion to God.***

How does Paul apply the idea of “mutual responsibility” to the slave/master relationship?

Did you notice the common principles found in each kind of relationship?

- All relationships should be based on our relationship with God.
- There is a mutual responsibility in all relationships.
- God's design for relationship brings us peace and joy and Him glory!

As we close today's lesson, reflect on the relationships in your life: church family, parents, children, spouse, and “master/slave.” Are you finding joy and peace? Do they bring honor to God? Where do you need to allow God to work?

Weekly Challenge

(Each week, in addition to the weekly lesson, I will provide an opportunity – for those who have the time and desire – to go a little deeper. If you are unable to do this, please don't worry, but if you can, take the plunge!)

Read Colossians 3:18-25 and 4:1. Compare it to this week's passage in Ephesians. What additional insight did you gain about God's design for relationships?