

Submit to One Another  
Ephesians 5:21

Driving down a country road, a driver came to a very narrow bridge. In front of the bridge, a “YIELD” sign was posted. Seeing no oncoming cars, he continued across the bridge and on to his destination. On his way back driving from the other direction, he came to the same one-lane bridge. To his surprise, he saw another “YIELD” sign posted. He thought he remembered seeing the same sign on the other side of the bridge and after crossing he looked and sure enough yield signs had been placed on both sides of the bridge.

Drivers from both directions were requested to give right of way to any oncoming traffic. It was a reasonable and gracious way of preventing a head-on collision.

Too often though, we are like the captain of the ship who looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am the captain!" Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am seaman third class Jones." Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: "Alter your course 10 degrees south--I am a battleship." Then the reply came "Alter your course 10 degrees north--I am a lighthouse."

We're living in a day when few people want to give way. People throw their weight around thinking that who they are or what they have accomplished gives them the right to push people around. They earned. They deserve it. It's a "my way or the highway" mentality. With power they order people around just because they can. They want to be the one calling the shots. They want to be at the top of the pecking order in the barnyard of life. It

becomes a battle of the wills.

They believe that submission is for the weak minded. They consider them doormats to be dominated. Whether it's in the business world, politics, the home, or even in the church, someone always wants to be top dog.

Even in Christian marriages some men think that this idea of submission means that his wife and children are to fall in line and do what he says. After all he is the king of this castle and they are his subjects to do as he commands.

But that's not at all what the Bible teaches in regard to submission. When the Bible tells Christians to "submit to one another" (Ephesians 5:21) it is simply a reasonable and gracious request to let the other have the right of way and avoid interpersonal head-on collisions. Like the bridge signs – YIELD.

That is the essence of our one another passage today. We find it in Ephesians 5:21 where I invite you to turn this morning.

In one of the very first weddings I performed I read from Ephesians 5. After the ceremony the bride's grandmother who was in her 70's came up and told me she agreed with most everything I said except on the issue of submission. She didn't buy it at all.

It's unfortunate that in our culture there is so much misunderstanding about what it means to submit as if you have to check your will at the door. It's a distorted view. But then, we shouldn't be surprised that a Biblical view of submission is different from that of culture.

## I. OUR EXHORTATION

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”  
NIV

“Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.” The Message

“Honor Christ and put others first.” The Contemporary English Version

That very nicely sums it up. Embedded in submission is the idea of humility – a willingness to put others before yourself.

Submission comes from a military term meaning to draw up under battle, to form both troops or ships. It speaks of soldiers forming in military order under a commanding officer. In general then, it speaks of the submission of one individual under or to another. In New Testament Greek it means to arrange under.

What often is missed in the discussion on submission is that this is to be mutual. It's not intended for one class of people, or one gender, or one age group or even one ethnicity to submit to another supposedly dominant class, gender, age or ethnicity. We are to submit to one another. It is mutual meaning we submit to each other.

Some skip right over verse 21 and jump into verse 22, missing that verse 21 sums up the previous section and introduces the next.

Let's understand that submission affects every relationship that we have and Paul touches on some of them here.

In verses 22-24 wives are to be submissive to their husbands. A lot of folks want to camp on that and ignore the rest claiming the dominance of the husband over his wife, which misses the point.

In verses 25-33 husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. I would suggest that is a way of submitting to them, putting them before us.

Robyn and I were in a discussion this past week about this passage. She thinks she could do a better job at submitting. I think I could do a better job at loving her. It involves what we think, what we do, and what we say – attitudes, actions, articulations.

From the beginning there was to be equality and mutual submission in marriage.  
Genesis 2:23-24

Did you notice the equality that was evident from the beginning between Adam and Eve? In this case 1+1 does not equal 2, it equals one. We are made for each other and both for the Lord. But while there is equality, there is also headship. It does not mean that the husband exerts his authority and rules her with an iron fist. He is to lead with love which means there is also to be submission on his part.

The next affected relationship is between parents and children. We stop at verse 3 and ignore verse 4. Fathers are not to act unreasonably toward their children. Don't provoke or anger them. In other words, don't always ride them hard or be on their case. Even between parents and children there is to be mutual submission.

This past week when we picked up David from his week of camp we wanted to take him out for lunch. We said he would go where ever we wanted. It was his choice. He asked what his options were. I mentioned several giving strong emphasis to a buffet. He opted for something else. I could have usurped his choice and since I was both driving and paying could have changed the location. I didn't. We went where he wanted to eat.

Now that does not mean that I should or will defer to his desire all the time. There may be times that for the sake of his safety I will make a choice that overrides what he wants to do. Sometimes we must exercise that authority. We sometimes see extremes in parenting. On one hand there are the domineering parents who rule the brood harshly. On the other hand there are the lenient parents who allow just about anything.

Gene Getz writes “Even though we may be in a position of authority, submitting to others who report to us does not undermine our position. In

fact, when it's appropriate, we'll win respect for who we are and the position we hold."

Too often the person in leadership fear that if those under him or her, whether it's the husband leading in the home, the parents leading children, or a boss leading a work force that they feel in order to keep control they need to show them who's boss. It is the immature person who tries to take advantage of the situation.

Then we see in verses 5-9 there is to be a mutual submission between masters and slaves. In today's context we would say between employer and employees.

Paul is telling the believers in Ephesus to live in total contrast to the self-centered, "me first", society in which they lived. In every relationship we are to put others first, there is to be submission, and let me add within reason. If someone wants you to do something immoral or illegal, something that is contrary to God's Word, then you have a right to graciously decline. It's appalling to read reports of parents involving children in shop lifting or an employee or employer asking someone to cover up for them with a lie. That's not submission, that's coercion.

Now, I want to ask two questions.

The first is why should we submit? After all it's very evident from Scripture that God built into relationships whether home, or work, or government a hierarchy of authority, which we need for order in society. Otherwise there is chaos.

Yet we read in verse 21 that the key to relationships is in our submission. But consider how many relationships are anything than what they should be. Why should a wife submit to an unloving husband? Why should a husband submit to an unresponsive wife?

Why should a child submit to an overbearing parent?

Why should a parent submit to a rebellious child?  
Why should an employee submit to a cruel boss?  
Why should a boss submit to a lazy employee?  
Why should we submit to a greedy government?

Let me remind you again that to submit is to yield our will to the will of another. It is not abdicating responsibility or authority. It is deferring your desire for theirs. It's radical teaching and living. It's counter to what culture taught then and now, but then Christ teaches us to live radically different than the world. Submission is radical living. Philippians 2:3-4 "Let nothing be done through strife and vainglory, but in lowliness (humility) of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own interests, but also on the interests of others."

"Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. Care about them as much as you care about yourselves." The Contemporary English Version

"Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand." The Message

Humility, as I said earlier, is a thread that runs through the idea of submission. If you lack humility you will lack a submissive spirit. Instead of submission there will be defiance and disobedience. Show me a person who is unwilling to submit and I will show you a person who carries self-centeredness, bitterness, anger, jealousy, envy, unforgiveness and revenge. It just won't happen.

Humility is one reason we are to submit to one another. That's insinuated here. Like humility, submission is sacrifice over selfishness. It is a willingness to recognize the rights, needs, and wishes of others.

Why are relationships strained? Why might there be a reluctance to submit? James 4:1 gives us an answer. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? (In other words, why won’t you love one another, why won’t you forgive one another, why won’t you submit to one another?) Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”

Why don’t we submit to one another? It’s because we’d don’t want to give up our rights. We don’t want to yield our will. When the heart is on self, it won’t submit.

Another reason to submit is out of love. Christ loved the Father and willingly submitted to His will. Christ loved us so much He willingly submitted Himself to the torture of the cross and the crucifixion. He put our needs before His own. If we truly love one another as Christ loved us then we will put others first. If I love my wife as Christ loves the church, then I will make sacrifices on her behalf. She might become so surprised that she’ll ask me who I am and what I did with her husband.

All of this seems counter to what the world says we should do. It doesn’t make sense to them. As a matter of fact, submission is contrary to the human nature, but then as a Christian we have a new nature and are called to radical living.

There is one more reason we are to submit to one another. It’s found in our text and it couldn’t be a clearer message. “Submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ.”

Some translations have “out of fear for Christ.” Fear in this sense does not be afraid of or cower from, but to be in awe or respect. If we think for even just one moment what He has done for us we can’t help but come to the conclusion that He deserves reverence and praise. He is worthy. “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Revelation 4:12

If we don’t have a fear or awe or wonder for Christ, how will we submit to others? If we don’t or won’t submit to Him, if we don’t show respect for Him in all that He has done for us considering who we were in the first place, we won’t put others first. The mark of the Spirit filled believer is His willingness to submit to others.

It’s not out of duty but devotion.

It’s not out of selfishness hoping to get something in return, but out of sacrifice.

It’s not for any reward we might hope to gain, but out of reverence for Christ who saved us.

John MacArthur concludes that “*Every* obedient, Spirit-filled Christian is a submitting Christian.”

We have an exhortation to submit to one another. Because it’s not natural to us, we need an example, someone who can show us what it looks like and scripture provides an excellent one. When it comes to submission, Christ is our greatest example.

## II. OUR EXAMPLE

Let’s read several passages. In them we will find another thread that runs through the trait of submission. It’s the word servant.

Matthew 20:25-28 submission, service, surrender

John 13:1-17

Philippians 2:1-11

Christ Himself gives us a clear example of what it means to submit to others and to His Father. He exhibited submission when as Creator and Sustainer of the universe He came to earth to be a servant of the very people who despised and rejected Him. Every Christian is to follow His example of submission to others.

Here is the One who could have commanded that we fall down and worship Him.

Here is the One who could have demanded that we obey Him.

Here is the one who could have instantly stopped

the torture.

Instead of demanding that the Israelites crown Him King, instead of conquering Rome with one spoken word, He chose to humble Himself, submitting to the will of the Father by coming as a servant and dying for our sin, taking our place, paying our debt. There is no greater example for us to follow of submission than Christ. So how do we do something that isn't natural to us?

We need enablement.

### III. OUR ENABLEMENT

I said earlier that there were two questions. The first one was why should we submit and I offered several reasons, the last one being the most compelling. We submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, because we love Him. He gave us the greatest example of submission both in His serving life and then in His sacrificial death.

The second question is this: how do we submit to one another? To answer that we must return to verse 18 where we are told to "walk in the Spirit." There's our enablement.

There are a series of participles that all point back to being filled with the Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit there are obvious and recognizable results. We will sing to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

We will sing and make music in our heart to the Lord.

We will give thanks to God for everything. And We will submit to one another.

These are a visible evidence of being filled with the Spirit. Submitting to one another then is only possible through His filling. If I will not daily yield my will to the will of the Spirit, I will not yield myself to submit to Christ or to others. It then becomes a matter of the will – mine or His. If His – I'll submit to others willingly. If mine – I'll selfishly exert my will be done.

If we are going to submit to one another we need His filling. Attempting to do so in our own power would be like filling our gas tank with water and hoping it will start. The car needs the filling of gasoline in order for it to do what it's supposed to do.

What happens then when we disobey this principle of mutual submission?

1. Quarreling – I Corinthians 1:10-12
2. Divisiveness – I Corinthians 3:1-9
3. Selfishness – I Corinthians 11:17-22
4. Disorderly worship – I Corinthians 14:26-33

To overcome these and submit to one another we must be filled with the Spirit. And that begins with leadership modeling for you how the church should act in mutual submission.

We need to understand clearly what the Bible says about why and how we are to submit to one another and that it can happen only when we are filled with God's Spirit. We need to understand Scripture and then practice it. As I said earlier, every relationship involves submission.

1. I Peter 5:2-3 – Church leaders are to submit to other members in the body of Christ.
2. I Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17 – Members of the body of Christ are to submit to church leaders.
3. I Peter 5:5-6 – Young men are to submit to older men. We could camp there for a while and talk about the general lack of respect shown to the elderly.
4. Ephesians 5:25, 28; Colossians 3:19; I Corinthians 7:3-4 – Husbands are to submit to their wives.

5. Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:8; Titus 2:3-5; I Peter 3:1-4 – Wives are to submit to their husbands.
6. Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21 – Parents are to submit to their children.
7. Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20 – Children are to submit to their parents.
8. Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1 – Employers are to submit to their employees.
9. Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; I Peter 2:18 – Employees are to submit to their employers.
10. Romans 13:1, 5, 7; I Peter 2:13-17 – Christians are to submit to government officials. Here's another area we could camp out for a while.

Let me remind you that mutual submission means we both have a yield sign on our side of the same bridge we are trying to cross. Submission is a reasonable and gracious request to let the other have the right of way to avoid interpersonal head-on collisions. Being Spirit-filled leads to submission.

Take time this week and examine the various relationships you have and determine whether or not there is a willingness to submit. Then take the necessary steps to act on it. It is a way to demonstrate Christ like character, especially to a world that is watching and wondering. Let your light shine so others can see what you're doing and bring glory to God and others to Christ for salvation.